



Not So Marvelous
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Foreword

Does the world really need another hero? And what makes them so "super" in the first place? Have you personally been victimized by the "heroic" "saving" tactics of those that deem themselves in the right? Well look no further. You're part of a growing group of individuals that have dealt the same blows, over and over. You may read on to feel imparted with the same level of "whaaaaaaa" and "WHY" as our expressive Berry in the pages that follow.

If you cannot imagine a world in which anyone could complain about these patriots doing the lords work before us, well, let's just consider the perspective of someone new to your own. Read on and you may discover a truth that will no longer allow you to return to the way you were. And that's not even a reference to *The Way We Were*, which is both an incredible movie AND song by the legendary Barbra Streisand. No. You'll have to imagine, just how sick the citizens can be in that universe of "supers." The few that aren't distracted by "our city is saved from this existential threat." The ones that are honest about being displaced, stuck in sudden traffic, or injured in the cross fires of these intergalactic disparities. It can be scary enough just at tax season! Imagine, running late through no fault of your own, to file your appointed taxes when suddenly, a black hole opens before you, your car teeters towards that sky-doomed beast, while dozens, no hundreds, of people lift towards it, losing gravity. In swoops an alleged "hero" to save the day by plugging the hole with an extra-extra-extra large plunger. Your car falls to the ground. But the hero didn't secure a safety pad for anyone around you. You have a mild concussion hitting your head upon the steering wheel as this country's "safest automobile of 2007" collides with the ground. Not before you witness dozens, excuse me, as we established, hundreds of bodies surrounding you collide in the same way. Only, they do so without the comfort of your cars restraints. You watch them all crash, implode and some even explode around you just before passing out, yourself. Yes, it's disgusting. It's misfortunate. And, perhaps it could've been avoided had the "super" created some sort of net to catch these people before that hole was plugged. What do I know, I only own a plumbing business? The local authorities bang on your car, and it's time to continue as thunderous applause roars around you, thankful that the city (particularly the casinos) were saved. Yes, life rolls along. And you, fresh off your concussion, and rampant whiplash, return to the duty at hand: to file taxes, an appointment you are a wee bit late for now! You rush to a parking lot that requires payment, and enter a building that has not been updated in your own lifespan, only to be told that you owe \$5,284.13 in federal taxes--a portion of which help to pay for the acts of that "hero" you just witnessed. Shaking, through spiked adrenaline and a bit of concussion leftovers, you sign up for a payment plan, shake the accountants hand and have successfully filed your taxes for the year 2011. But ask yourself, did you do so happily? Anonymous of the upper NJ area submitted this story to us in 2011. We weren't quite ready for

the truth ourselves. But after further stories, much like this, we have decided that it is collectively time to ask: what's so marvelous about these appointed with "super" "powers" before us?

After great market research, and field testing with other stories like hers, we have settled upon the one citizen most likely to get this point across to all of you doubters and naysayers to our truths! Berry, one most inconvenienced and the almighty loudest complainant: he is an elderly white man in the biggest city in the country, one whom constantly witnesses attacks by these that dare to be called "super." He dares to pose the question, we ourselves have ever since the eye opening papers of Ambrosia Sahlid, I mean anonymous. Are those "heroes" or are they actually villains? Berry doesn't answer this, but it's a great question to pose for yourself.

This book is an unbiased account, dedicated to people that like to complain, like Larry David. But it's "not" him in this book, anymore than the stories have any relation to the propaganda touted throughout comics, worldwide. Anything showcased or read in that nature is your own bias, dear reader, and therefore "coincidental." Moving on--

All thoughts expressed by the central character, Berry, are written in italics...

Like this!

Throughout the book. And those things may be interpreted (by you) as something that Berry has spoken aloud in totality, partially or merely a thought from his head. As the reader, you decide.

Enjoy.

Or kvetch.

So long as you purchase.

Picture it, the opening frame: a mid-sized structure, of a modest apartment in what has become one of the most premium areas in the country's biggest city, the Upper West Side.

Chapter One

It was the night before Christmas, for those who celebrate it, and all through the apartment complex... not a creature was stirring except for Berry making his nightly brew. And I do mean stirring in the literal sense for Berry was physically stirring a pot of his famous nightly brew, famous to him and no one else. He's not much of a sharer. Which brings about the issue of the moment. It was the night before Christmas, as so you've been told and yada yada yada not a creature was flummoxed, the whole building round, except for the hungry not-prioritized Betta fish in that same apartment as Berry, numbered 212. Fervently splashing about, "I want some of the brew. You never share! It's Christmas Eve, for Christ's sake." The fish speaks. Get used to it.

This damn fish.

Berry pondered on how to handle this situation, but landed upon the fact that it was too late to return Betta. Returning a fish wasn't out of the scope of possibility for Berry, the old, old man standing before us in his apartment. Perhaps we should have led with that. The fish did not own the apartment to himself. This isn't that fantastical of a novel. Get it together. Berry would love to return the fish actually, in this moment, but how embarrassing would that be? A dog, sure. Maybe it's just too much work! But a fish? They just sit in their damn bowl. "If you can't take care of a fish, you need a psych eval," is the imagined response of Berry. But as the tail thrashed about in its agitated bowl, Berry was tempted.

Can a man have a private moment? A room to one's own?

Which is an excellent Virginia Woolf Book, high on Berry's list for "must-reads" to all of his previous students during his tenure at one of the most prestigious colleges in the city, but I digress.

Hello! I'm trying to cook my milk. Leave me alone.

Berry, in addition to being very, very old, was known for his frankness and crankiness. This rings apparent as he moves steadily towards the stove, past a series of butcher knives-- and contemplates much-- lifting!!! the simmering skim milk to the lip of his favorite mug for his evening sit and sip. He didn't hurt the fish. Calm down.

The very, very old man has asked to be referred to simply as Berry, for this is mostly a true story and he doesn't want all of that attention. He is private, so private that even the mail deliverer doesn't know his last name. Just this afternoon they got into it again, for Berry tends to redact the name on packages. Mid-argument, Berry exclaimed with a curt--

It doesn't really matter.

So, let's just respect that disrespectful statement, and refer to him as all great figures in pop culture are referred to with (think Madonna, Beyoncé or Adele, but without the music), in the singular: Berry. I don't know another famous Berry, outside of the Knott's farm situation. So, if you do know of a singular Berry, just know this is not him.

It is 11:58 PM.

Berry notes as he slowly dips into his only living room chair, mug in hand, to sit. Yes, the room only has one chair! But, a room to one's own requires very little. Berry wasn't known for company. Having a fish was a lot of upkeep. It truly drained his social battery. So, the singular chair more than sufficed. It had great back support, which at any age is essential, and adequate feet support when a recline ensued. But what made the chair a keeper was that it was versatile where it

mattered most: this chair rocked, and I don't mean musically. I mean literally.

Rocking chairs are the fucking best.

Berry thought this thunk just as he managed to sink into the rhythm of his first true rocking rotation, a 1-2-3. Again, it's not musical, so let that go. Berry finds the bravery to dip his lip to the lip of the mug and is splashed by the tail of an all too accurate blow from Betta's tank. "Success hahaha." Thinks, or perhaps states the fish aloud. Berry's dip in the milk is cut short.

Berry has learned to be less reactive to these sorts of assaults, in their odd couple spats, and decidedly pushes his rocking-recliner back out of the splash zone, and further into the shadowing hull of his room's sole window frame. Berry does what he likes best at this time of night: he stares into the darkened city-scape and finally sips upon the drink he worked so hard to craft for all of 2 (and a half) minutes.

Gah! My sciatica is acting up. Ow this milk is hot. Why do I drink this shit.

He says as more of a defiant statement than that of a question. And continues to stubbornly sip.

That's enough.

Berry is famous for almost finishing something, and giving up right before it's done. This could be a metaphor for his entire life: early retirement, cutting the line at the post office, giving his partial name... the list goes on and on, and that's all just stuff from today. But, I don't need to unpack that for him, what am I a therapist?

Berry dumps the remainder spillage into Betta fish's tank, as he passes onward towards his bed mere feet before him. Both Betta and Berry collapse for the night.

The hour is peaceful. The night is so still. Up, up on the rooftop there arose such a clatter— but Berry remained unmoved as his apartment wall ripped with a clatter.

Where are my glasses? What? WHAT IS THIS? Whaaaat?

Grabbing his Betta fish, and his best robe, wallet, and phone as the building swayed in its unbalanced new weight, Berry ran down the hallway. He passed many doors of people not yet awake. People he knew could be crushed should the building collapse, a pressing fear he has had since the early 2000's... the year "they" arrived... and all of these people with doors, a simple knock? He knew he could, no he should wake up everyone along the way. A simple task for such a loud, obnoxious old man.

Nah. Too tricky with the knocking and the fish. Every man for themselves.

Berry ran down the stairs and shuffled out of the door just in time. Amongst one of a baker's dozen others from the entire 16 floor complex stood on the sidewalk as the building indeed collapsed behind him. He scanned the faces of the survivors as their faces whitened with dust.

At least I don't have to hear those clomp clomp clomp gargantous fuckers in 312. Who wears shoes inside their house? Enjoy your shoes. Karma! Karmaaaa!

Overhead, a battle ensued between species of other realms.

Fucking aliens.

Many in the city, and the world--did not previously believe in species in the extraterrestrial before this. You can imagine what an eye opener that was... Now, just like many other nights in the city, there was a large gaping vortex filling the city's skyline. This one was a mess of black web, smoke and a sprawling entanglement of overall-

Intergalactic bs.

The Twister, the city's current favorite superhero, known for curating a vortex of fury and crime fighting passion, zipped through the webbing, chucked it up and shot it through every orifice of his firm, tout body. All onlookers were blown back. Car windows shattered, another apartment complex was tossed about, but remained standing tall. Only Berry's apartment was decimated in the wake.

No. NOOOOOOOOOOO!

The Twister stepped down onto the pavement, yards in front of Berry. "A twist of fateeee!" The crowd erupted with joy, and tumultuous applause. All except for one.

APPLAUSE?? For what? Is everyone conscious?? This fucking guy just blew apart our entire block. Look at all of this glass. Hold my fish. Somebody hold my fish. I'm gonna give him a piece of my-

The Twister spiraled, leapt into the sky and was seen no more. The thunder rolled in, and behind it came the presence of a city bus. "Y'all from that apartment?"

I wonder to which apartment you could be referring?

Silence.

The only one on the block that got destroyed?? Oh yes. The one with a bunch of dead bodies in it now? Yes. Please. Come and collect us-

"Get in Berry-Berry-quite-contrary."

Berry obliged and took a seat near the back.

"If you get any fish juice on my seats, I swear to—"

Berry stood up. This was just not his night. And he didn't want to be tested any further. And he had decided it was time to get off of the bus, but not without a few spoken, choice words.

Oh so you CAN all see. You see my fish. Let me direct your attention to our building that just collapsed. The Twisty did that.

"Twister."

It's not even a good name. And that catchphrase?? Don't get me started on the catchphrase.

"So don't start then. Sit down."

The twisted fate? He destroyed our building. The people above me died. The beloved, wonderful neighbors. And Marianne, you know I see you but I don't see the rest of your family. Where are they now? What did you do just run out and let them die? Are they in the rubble? What're you shrugging for? Meh. Just another day. So long as we get to help the intergalactic fates. Everyone is so selfish. Clapping for the death of your families like a bunch of hypnotized, short memory seals.

"Berry get off or shut up!"

You know what I will get off. I'd rather climb through the rubble than be amongst you idiots. You're all a bunch of sick fucks. Merry fucking Christmas. You stole this holiday from the pagans—

As the door shut on Berry, and the bus whirled by... alone, he did precisely that. He thought on to where the now misplaced neighbors would go. Probably to where all of the other victims to the circumstances of these unnatural superhero disasters take them, some school gym floor.

Bleh. Good riddance.

A simple man and his Betta fish climbed through the rubble of what was previously his home of 37 years.

This is exactly why this holiday is overrated.

He shook his fist to the sky and moved about the midnight streets to find a Taxi.

Chapter Two

Thank god.

But that was a thought short lived. Having waited 42 minutes outside in nearly snowing conditions, on the eve of Christmas for a cab, he

finally was taken in. And just as the thought began to enter his brain, it left it. For low and behold, before Berry were the sounds of two headrest screens playing ads for the newest superheroes efforts, a plug by the morning news team. To make matters worse, the cab driver was texting while driving.

Can you put your phone away and focus!

"Nobody's on the road. Look at this!" It wasn't just texting while driving, it was watching a live video while driving, for on the phone of the cab driver was the devastating occurrence of just an hour ago. Berry watched on as the cab driver swerved through traffic, cheering on the building's destruction with "Boom" and "Kazam" galore.

That was my house! My house you insensitive asshat!

"What's with the goldfish?"

Stop the car. I'd rather walk.

But it was the middle of an intersection. Stopping without watching your phone while driving would be scary enough. Berry weighed his options, get out of the car and likely injure himself—and more importantly his fish—or stay in the car until he could safely get it to a halt. But fast. And luckily, Berry knew the best way to end a "good time" which is through America's true favorite past time and People Magazine's May 2018 poll for best connectivity in the workplace: complaining. Or as Berry came to know and love it: kvetching.

This knock-off Hasbro named hero got keys to the city? And for what? To go around and blow up its buildings. He can have my fucking key while he's at it considering he blew the door right off its hinges!!

With a pressing key to the glass that thinly separated the veil of driver to rider, the pedal of the brake was pressed with equal measure in force. "Out."

No! Nooooo. But I've so much further to walk.

This was the target of Berry's rattling complaints: to leave expeditiously. Sometimes it pays to hit them where it hurts. Feigning disheartenment, to keep the driver in a gray area, Berry hid his true motives. "Look at him, he's just an innocent old, old, old, old man that complains a lot. I'm sure he has a sad life." Thought the ageist driver. So is life. The cab driver contemplated if kicking this old, old man out of his cab was an unforgivable act. And Berry was all too happy to play victim in this little role-play.

Sniffle. OK, I'll get out. Merry Christmas.

Berry's wincing pout converted to sheer joy as the cab driver pulled away.

He didn't charge me. Success!!

It was a Christmas miracle. But this smile and seeming holiday cheer faded as Berry turned around to witness just where he had been parked in front of, and whom.

Chapter Three

BAM! Berry was plopped in front of--

No! Not Henrietta Davenport's apartment!!

Yes, thee fated ex he was betrothed to, and was found guilty of cheating on with one of her friends eleven years ago. He was a sitting duck. This wasn't Berry's best moment, nor was the cheating. But it, much like today, wasn't his worst--if you can imagine. I'm sure you have. Good. I won't say more on it. And Henrietta had never gotten over it. Rightfully, so. But this did make living a mere four blocks away from her... difficult. Berry had to be diligent when shopping, doing pick-ups, or drop-offs, of any kind. They were in the same neighborhood. He had managed to change most of his shops, minus the local butcher. Whom knew all the details and befriended Berry as a result. Perhaps rooted in misogyny, or even the impractical new chance of rebounding with Henrietta? The butcher upgraded, and often threw in extra measures for anything Berry bought. "Berry!! Here's a lamb!"

And here, two blocks down and two avenues over, Berry found himself face to face with the doorman, a true wolf--

Bambam!

As Berry had nicknamed the doorman / wolf, for, and here it aptly comes: BAM! Berry was swiftly ushered away. But it is too late, Henrietta already spotted him, as she strolls in this exact moment up the street with her nightly cigarette, the long, brooding kind that dangles a yardstick from anyone's mouth, and shows a bygone era of class, mixed with not giving an f for one's lungs. Here, the signs of an OG smoker, and a diva. The cigarette dangled, with her perfumed disdain upon the looks of "Berry, is that you? I thought I smelled a rat." Through billowing smoke came a leashed, aged bulldog revved up to defend her honor, all of these years later. A consequence of splitting, is that, much like the butcher, the dog had taken sides. It would have been jarring had the little alien beast not been doused in little mittens and a scarf.

Hello!

The bulldog abandoned its honor, and ran to Berry to say hey.

"Down Bastillion!" She spat out, in a fur that PETA would kill to remove from her angular frame. Such a diva.

Of course she renamed him. Anyway, I was just about to leave. I didn't come here on purpose. Honestly I avoid this street and you're little henchman and your little dog, too—

But it was too late, Bastillion, formerly known as Batty, was licking the exposed calf on Berry's left. A wondering bulging eye gandered to Berry's fish, and thus the excitement's source. Betta ushered "down Bastard, down," puckering up at the grave sight before him. "What a drooling little hairy beast. You let them dress you up like a child? We are not the same. And such a ferociously hairy beast... Ms. Henrietta."

"Down Bastillino!" Though she wasn't Italian, she liked to pretend, at times. Famously, she had auditioned for the role in *My Cousin Vinny* but lost out to "she who must not be named." For, that could've been Henrietta's Oscar. In another universe, perhaps she did win it. And didn't need to focus on her exes. Alas, here we are. In this misfortunate universe, instead, but what a visual. "We do not make friends with the enemy." She turned to the door, held by Bambam, and stood with a questionable linger.

Is she gonna attack or invite me in?

It remained unanswered, lingering with the trails of smoke and unwinding mitten.

Berry, just through with patting himself down for his essential: phone, wallet, keys, was paying her NO mind. He had taught himself to look away at this modern Medusa, ensnared enough for the both of them in the dramas of her own volatile flair.

Avoid the snare of Medusa's gaze. Sure, she'll lure you in, but not before that ssssssnapping ssssstare of truth that turnssssss you into ssssssuch riddled regret. Ssssstoned, you'll be. Ssss ssss stoned, you'll feel.

Henrietta remained, herself like a statue, lingering in a moment. Berry wondered if the whole city stood still with her as he shouted something he swore he would never do again. A favor from his lips he could not un-mutter--

Can I use your phone! I left mine in that cab!!

Henrietta thawed, and quickly. She was reared up, full-throttle.

Picture it, a very, very old man in his nightcap, holding a fish bowl, running for his life on the Upper West Side. You got it?

Great cause Henrietta, Bastillion, and Bambam chased our little expletive Berry off of their stoop, down the corner, and further away. Whether Bambam was half-assing his run, or being gentlemenly so as to not leave Henrietta behind, is part of the question we shan't be asking. I think the true culprit here is the little dog, himself. "Hurry up Bastillion!" She yelped dragging his wide frame from behind.

I won. Nah nah nah nah nah!

Berry resented being reduced to such toddler behavior. But was equally impressed that he had outrun three individuals in such an unexpected chase! In the middle of the night! After such devastating mayhem! Had the night peaked?

Nope.

Berry knew better as he waddled towards the huddled masses. Not Miss Liberty, but another tourist spot of a particular area. In search for a space that he knew, unequivocally, would be open this time of night. A (relatively) safe space, where he could grab a quick bite, a quick drink, and a phone all at the same time for under five bucks. That of...

Chapter Four

Time Square \$5 slices!

Berry hated to compare things to when he was young, with "back in my day," which is a pretty unattractive statement, overall. But he did do a quick comparison when reading the sign, before him: Times Square \$5 Slices. This hated his momentum, a city with price gouging tactics is never an attractive one, particularly one you've grown up in.

These used to be \$1 before these supers were all involved. And 1.75 WITH a soda. But no, no! Now it's 5 with OUT the soda. And no utensils. You gotta ask for utensils. What's up with that!

He thought as he burst into the overly-lit pizza palace of yesteryear. Boy was it filled with a cast of characters! Even I could falter upon explaining them in such thorough detail. The mind cannot conceive what stood, slouched, and groveled before him. Picture it instead this way. Picture, through the lens of a child whom was asked to draw a group of villains, and the kid chosen wasn't exactly known for their illustratious* capabilities. So, the child at hand produced a bunch of scribbles, just a bunch of messy ass lines and you, let's call you the FBI in this scenario, are left to guess who these characters are. First you gotta start with the basics, where the legs start and the facial hair ends... or begins... either of them! It's hard to tell. You, the FBI agent, look over that group of people that the child true, and compare it with the drawing itself. One more check-between. "Ahah!" You turn to the child and say, "thank you, you've been so much help." And you're not even lying because that drawing is EXACTLY the characters in question. Are these limbs or are these mustaches? How can one person have this many mustaches? Whose to say? Anyway, that's what stood before Berry, just a bunch of scribbles.

*Let's add this to our vocab-bank, shall we? Don't you just love a combo word: illustration + illustrious? No?

...

No.

Berry maneuvered carefully, so as not to trip amongst the scribbles, these lines, and their fur balls.

In wondering how such a child prodigy (I'm keeping the metaphor going for a bit, get used to it) could have drawn up these before him, he slid further and further through their webbed, tangling obstructions.

Gross. Gross. Ahhhh.

Whacked, plucked, and pitted against follicles and molecules alike, unliked, he mustered up the courage to continue on.

Gross. AHHHHH.

At once stuck between a plink and a plunk, two lines that should never intersect... yet did, Berry darted forward, unmoving. Stuck, he tickled whatever it was. A sneeze was produced. "Achoo!" The line gave forth to new air and there, FINALLY, Berry could move. Blasted by the sneeze, nearly halted his abilities. But he harnessed the power from deep within, and receded into the back of the store, where a true rarity lived: a pay phone.**

**If this item doesn't "ring" any bells, Google it. Society really had a good thing going with these.

It was obvious what to do. Berry needed to dial a family member, one he had not spoken to and avoided as often as he could, for they had a child. Berry had nothing against children, per say. But he never had desired to particularly have one for himself. Do you catch my drift? The little ones are not his cup of tea. But what else was he supposed to do? He had already lost his home, dodged an ex and her henchman! It was time for some peace, and some rest. All that stood in the way of this was one simple thing: a strident scribble that rest gravely upon the phone.

Through the vortex of exchanges between the front of the store and the back of the store, much had changed within Berry's disgust-o-meter. He was still ready to gag at whatever was transpiring all around him, but his swiftness to action was quickened. He was ready to interact with even this hairy (dare I say it: mossy) line before him.

I'm calling my family because it's Christmas.

The line moved, but not in an ability to help. No. The line... it moved out of anger.

Oh shit, that's a growl.

This line might belong to a dog? Or an opossum, even? But Berry did not have time to think, for where would the teeth extend from such a thing as a line? Top? Bottom? Or anywhere along this scribbly bit I'd call "the middle." And think fast is what the witty Berry did, with perhaps the stupidest trick in the book: Berry produced a napkin and pretended to throw it. But the line of whatever was growling did not

notice that the item was in fact not thrown at all. They just witnessed this grand gesture, and sprawled into a leaping chase. And who can blame it? What line has two eyes and can see? Not i, certainly. That very line went soaring through the maze of lines, all that gobbeldy dash, wrapping them up with it along the way. The lines collected, and folded amongst one another into a yarn of a time, and flew through the open door frame with a tumbling roll. They gathered and spiraled past the pizzas, all the slices, out onto the street. And with that movement, the door shut with a sighing relief. The whole place breathed as if for the first time, especially Betta, Berry's fish. This was further extended by a momentous, singular clap. One coming from two sides of a line that folded in on itself. The clap of the cashier... I think? Or perhaps a thief? Who can tell? He too was a mere scribble. Hard to make out these things.

That'll keep him... it? Occupied for a very long time.

Berry bowed to the clap of this cashier or thief and using that same napkin he "threw," he grabbed the phone, doused it in a packet of packaged sanitizer he had molded under a patent that never took,*** all over phone smothering it with his sleeve, then dialing the only current member of his family he was still speaking with.

***This is a rather long story with very little payoff, as you've just witnessed, for I've just expressed it the patent didn't take. But imagine a ketchup packet filled with sanitizer. Convenient, but confusing. It could be mistaken for a condiment. I know I have. That was one awful tasting sandwich.

Hey! Nephew. Hi-

"Berry, we've been trying to get ahold of you."

Yeah, I lost my phone in a cab.

"Are you... ok?--"

Yeah, yeah, my building crashed down but I'm ok.

"Your what? No wonder you sound winded. I was going to ask why you saw Henrietta again... she just called me."

I told her to leave you alone.

"We've all been very worried."

Why does everybody act like I'm a stalker. I want nothing to do with her? Nothing. Sure, I like her dog, for the most part, but I want her to go away. Not in a bad way. I don't wish harm on her or anything like that. I just would like her out of my life, in a normal, nuanced sort of way, sooner rather than later and hopefully for forever. We broke up 11 years ago, let me go to the fucking butcher.

"I thought you got the butcher?"

And to be fair, it's the reason I got the corrective eye surgery in the first place. You can't blame me for mixing up her and Loretta, they looked just alike when my eyes were still crossed. Sure, that only explains the first indicated incident and doesn't explain away the other two times that my actions, and our collective actions transpired. But aren't I better off this way?

It was at this moment that the little ball of yarn barreled back through the door and straight onto Berry's leg, biting with all of its might. Berry whimpered. And the lines along with it, as the cashier/thief hit it with a dust pan and danced around to shoo it away.

"Berry, are you better?"

Loads! Present company excluded. I've just fighting off some scribbles.

"Why don't you call me me at a better time?"

This is the best of times!

It was actually the worst of times. Seldom anything could come from a public standing past 10PM. And nothing rang truer than this particular 2 AM, as the lines now slouched whacking one another with various objects. One previous batch of neat, tangled yarn, had now splattered into a frizzled concoction of shady outlandish outlines.

I think things are a lot better this way. If she's like this while I'm just in the neighborhood, I mean imagine, us, married? Will you all keep it down, I'm on the phone!!

Several squiggles lashed out towards Berry, as his reflexes proved timely. He was an agile old, old, old man, for he ducked just before a napkin dispenser chucked him upside of the head. Fitting, considering that was the item he fake threw.

Ahah! And see that's why it would be easier if she just... went... away.

Berry was whispering into his phone so that all of the shady characters wouldn't misinterpret (and potentially take action for a quick buck) on the murderous details he was "not" alluding to.

"Wait, your building fell down! Berry, are you OK?"

Finally, some empathy. If Berry was the sort to get emotional over acceptance and acknowledgement of his (bleh) feelings, perhaps he would've responded differently.

Oh, now you take a sudden interest in my well-being!

"Do you need a place to stay?"

Click.

Oh. I meant to say yes. Oh well, he got it.

And just like that, in a New York minute, Berry was at the PATH (train to NJ) station.

No. No, I need TWO tickets, please.

The ticket attendee patted the singular ticket and shut the ticket dispensing area off. Berry fought against his instincts of reactionary movements and attempted to produce a smile.

It is Christmas, after all. Maybe this person practices that. If I produce the holiday "cheer," I might be effective.

To watch such a Grinch produce a smile would be alarming to witness at any time of night, but particularly on this night as a new black eye was forming, and his hobbling, most recently scribbled (to be interpreted: recently bitten) leg was most hobbledous. Staggering between breaths as he counted 1-2-3 (in the stages of smiling, pre-response), an act his anger coach had taught him but seldom implemented, he was met with a buzzing noise. The counting was interrupted, which TRULY pissed Berry off.

I didn't even get to finish counting to ten!!!!

The ticket taker (to be read: ticket giver), accustomed to such visual tragedies as that which certainly stood before them now, spoke first without a blink between the beats, "Sir, fish don't require a ticket to ride."

Chapter Five

You will note that "Ticket to Ride" is a famously fun family adventure board game filled with fabulous wonder and freaking merriment for any game player aged 8 and onward, but despite the ticket taker (giver) murmuring those three trademarked words, in the cities largest train station, this was no such ride.

As soon as Berry took to his seat, as in ass hits chair, the train was fated for doom. Berry launched forward into the pair of oddities before him. Thankfully they were not in scribble formatting, and just presumed "regular" people. Though...

I prefer the scribbles.

Berry fought this thought as he peeled himself off of the man who continued to sit all too close to Berry. His knees kept hovering into Berry's knees, a feeling he detested. And the woman presumably paired with the devastating pair of knobs (to be interpreted: pair of knees), sat aghast, several paces away from Berry. She fully turned her body in horror and only peered at the man, as he spoke to her at perfect

volume, with a crisp cheeky turn, fully over-the-shoulder to murmur, "What?" As she eyed Berry. Not Berry, she was eyeing Betta.

"I think this bitch wants to eat a fish!" Splashes about Betta, gravely concerned for his safety.

No. She just hates you.

Hate: this did not bother Berry... much. He was used to hate, especially from passerby's. Some would say he was conditioned to it. Before he even could fully express an opinion he felt this expression passed on to him, not by all, but by a considerable amount. And it was something he returned to others, most, in fact. Hatred just sort of passed back and forth like a delicate tennis match, throughout most of his life. You see, disdain was a common thread in his life. One could state a case for the nurture versus nature argument upon this, here. But who has the time? What's important is that these too knobby snobs before him posed no real threat to his Betta, and in turn, he couldn't care less. He fell asleep, if just for a moment, in peace, despite the knocking of the knees and snarling over-the-shoulder jowls before him.

Ah, peace. At last.

Berry sunk into his seat, quite comfortably. Surely the worst was behind him. That he had made it through the thick of things, and as dawn threatened to break from the horizon, a sinking feeling permeated. Berry tried to push it away, as he always did. But that gut reaction spoke too loudly to ignore. The threat of a truth. And sure enough, thirty minutes into his ride, and in all actuality nowhere near the actual sunrise he had imagine, he became truly disgruntled.

"Attention, passengers." A noise broke the tension over the intercom.

"1. 2." Counted Berry's fish.

Motherfuckers!!!

And so, a blaring truth unfurled like the belch of a beast you wish not to meet. The intercom goer spoke on, as the knobs whispered to one another, "I told you you can't carry wild animals onto public transit."

Shut up. I'm trying to listen to the intercom. And we all know it's a fucking patch job, at best.

True, you can only hear every other word on a typical intercom system, at most. But his own line delivery wasn't the best. Berry smiled, which worked retroactively. It was too late to play nice. "So rude!" The pair complained in unison as they stood. But that was not the rudest thing that happened to them on this night. The thing they feared the most, transpired. As the noises overhead, garbledy-garbled-gunk that it was, roared on in the distance, the train jerked and jostled about. Anyone that's ever held a cup of water will know that jarring movements are ripe for a spill, and that is precisely what

happened as the train cabin dashed and dotted the train tracks. Two drops, no let's not downplay it... THREE drops of Betta's water splashed out from the tank.

One landed upon each of the knobbiest of knees. And the third landed directly upon the cheek so often whispered over. Perfect in their placement. And perfect was the shrieking horror that unfolded before Berry now as a result.

She screamed, he tripped over himself. She spilled into the aisle and bounced rambunctiously up and down the cabin, swatting at her face. He produced a massive bag from overhead, eerily shaped like a body bag, and dragged it down towards his disgusted spouse. "I am absolutely repulsed."

By your reflection?

"I have never seen anything like it in my life!!! Disgusting."

Says your mirror, daily.

Betta lifted a fin and teased another droplet their way. The cheeky woman saw this and fainted at the mere possibility of another droplet upon her. Her knobby sir caught her with that mysterious coffin-like bag, and dragged both into the next cabin.

Good riddance.

Betta and Berry high-fived (well, they high-fingered and high-finned through the glass. A winning team... in a losing moment) awaiting the moment with which they would inevitably be thrown off of the cabin at high speed for causing such a disturbance amongst the passengers in this illustrious train. For sure, that pair were in the Captain's quarters by now demanding their heads on spikes. Captain? Or whomever runs such a vessel as this.

The pair had moved along to another cabin and were nowhere in sight, probably to find the captain, or whomever steam rolls this vessel and to demand that this treacherous main walk the plank. Or some other odd complaint.

The speaker wreaked with blaring havoc, a whirring noise overhead most deafening. And in the space between the two ears came a stinging sense of clarity as the microphone worked as it should for the first time in its long life, "We will hold here until further steps are announced."

Dammit.

"Dammit!!" Betta agreed.

There's nothing worse than being stuck aboard a public vessel, with no time table. No end in sight. All rules are thrown out the window. Control? Gone. Responsibility? Not your own. But you are still

responsible to feed yourself and be well rested, to listen and to do so with a smile, despite the changes surrounding you! Always.

"Harrowing." Betta agreed.

Already committed to the long night behind them, what's another 24 hours? Berry lifted Betta to move about the cart and find anything worth their entertainment. Which was a smart move should the-rejected Bonnie and Clyde (to be interpreted: doorknob and door-un-handled) came back from whatever hellacious mission (to be interpreted: Beth, Bath, and Beyond boring mission) they were on.

Chapter Six

"We will hold here until further steps are announced."

Announcing plans for a future announcement, isn't an announcement! The one requirement of being an announcement is... to make some sort of news. That's the very act of announcing. Otherwise there's nothing to announce! What a stupid decision. I'd hate to be that announcer. Imagine being an announcer with nothing to announce. I don't envy their position. So unfulfilling. How do they sleep at night?

Berry found three M&M's in his next seat and ventured to eat them. Of course he didn't... but it was tempting.

Would the Princess and the Pea have felt these? Yes. But would she have eaten them? The story always cuts that part short. We never know if she eats the pea.

"Eats her pee?" Betta thought humans to be gross. But not particularly this, for he was a fish and fish swim in theirs.

I want a snack. My blood sugar!

No, Berry did not have a blood sugar problem. But he did have much discontent. This was exacerbated when he chucked flakes of Betta's food into his environment.

Envy. The things I do for you.

This is precisely the kind of example you should give to not being a parent. For which, I believe we have established, Berry would not make a good one of.

What else is one to do on a "PATH" such as this at this grave hour other than to complain?

Sounds like a perfect usage of time to me!

It was his favorite pastime. Foremost, he complained about his own ineptitude. His lack of foresight. Berry hadn't thought to pack meals, plural, for such a trip as this. That is, had he planned to have this trip in the first place. Houseless, with nothing other than his friend

and his wits, with no phone, and only a bowl to carry, he was confined to look around. You know how watching paint dry is boring? Imagine if the paint dried thirty years ago. That's where Berry is. All of the typical people-watching (and judging) enticement has long since faded with the transitional PM to the misfortunate AM. There is famously no coffee on such trains as this. In fact, the only amenities aboard such a mistaken "PATH" are the pools of sweat from passerby's, and the threatening pool of sweat from one's own brow at looking on at these characters, unfortunately not as scribbled as those in the pizza joint. Here in the shadowing recess lights of the train, that darkness makes one hone in on the features mysterious more than any overhead light can dare blot out.

Berry notes nothing noteworthy. He almost missed the knees protruding into his. At least then he would have something to complain about and not be so truly... bored.

The sun crept in, just over the ledge of trees surrounding the train. They were in a thinning forrest with dew on the ground. It glistened.

BLEH.

Berry needed sleep, but didn't trust any of these potential onlookers with his precious Betta fish. Not after the incident of the three splashes. He was very protective of Betta. And that's not even an alpha joke.

*Double bleh. If you think you're an "alpha," just know that Betta would eat you if you tried to swim with them.**

*Fun fact, Betta fish can eat other fish. And they would certainly eat anyone that thinks they are an / the "Alpha." Rest well, in that.

Berry could fight no longer. Sleep came unto him. Berry and Betta nestled into a cart most unoccupied. And as they did, the PATH train darted from NJ to Connecticut, which is in fact the entirely opposite direction and includes coming back THROUGH the major city he had indeed started in.

It did so because this is the directional "PATH" that the PATH takes. But not merely because of that, it could not finish its route. And Berry missed the opportunity to exit in the city's station. He wouldn't have opted for that, anyway. He paid for THIS ticket. And wanted to see it to the finish line, even if it took four days to do it. It wouldn't take quite four days, but it was taking much, much longer than intended. Merry Christmas, indeed.

Merry Christmas, as he passed through the city. Merry Christmas into Connecticut. Merry Christmas back through the city. Merry Christmas in New Jersey...

We're still in New Jersey??!!!

Berry didn't know he doused off for as long as he did. Let's just not tell him.

A noise cleared the questions and furies with furious flusters much better, "The path of the PATH has been cleared." Reader's note: no one aboard laughed at this attemptive joke.

This announcer is doing jokes? Don't quit your day job!

But Berry was startled by all of the people around him. People that he hadn't noticed before. One of which he had rested his head upon the shoulder of. A person whom was now smiling, a genuine smile. And was... clapping. The passengers clapped.

Who claps at announcements? What is this world coming to?! Ugh. Disgusting use of hands. No one can hear you. Might as well just do the movement and make none of the noise. It's the same result and, honestly, a better intent. Be quiet. Do that quietly! Mute. Where is the mute button?

Those around him, the new passengers Berry couldn't configure the true sudden population of, but presumed swiftly that they too must be hiding from the knobby snobby pair, spoke. The passengers chattered away at gossip and tidbits upon why the train couldn't previously clear its way to New Jersey. "There was no path for the PATH because the path was filled with trees." "I heard it was filled ripped to smithereens." "Yes! But thankfully it was. Or else the city would've been in danger!" "Thankful for the savior, the day of the..." And there it barreled through a cannon to shoot down Berry off his seated position. This, through the murmuring chatters of some Lin-Manuel not-quite-on-brand rap-like discussions that the Twister had made his way through these tracks, and diverted all PATH trains from continuing on.

All of this because of the super villains!!!

"What super villains are you talking about?" "Do you know how to listen?" "Somebody shut up this Gandalf," "this lecher!" "This pious, this prick," "This very, old, old, old man!"

Berry fought against the grain to speak to these Hamil-TON of people before him, all enraged that he dare speak out of turn against a clear and pressing favorite for the city.

The Twisty and his kind are villains.

"The Twister!!"

Yes they are. Because they destroy homes, and they de-rail train tracks. You've just seen it. We've all been inconvenienced today!

"It's for the greater good." "You just shush." "And be quiet, you old, old, old--"

They cause destruction in their wake, every which way they go! Heroes don't do that! They don't. No! Nooooo! Why are we rhyming? Ew. (Clears throat) Heroes, real heroes, they clean up messes, they don't cause them. And if they do, they clean them up. They make sure people are safe. All the people. Not just some of them. Here we go choo-choo bopping down yet another useless track. Yet another hopeless course. Yet another moment for us victims to their plight. Against these villains!! When will the terror end? Wake up people!! Wake up!!

Reminder, people don't like to be told that they're wrong. Especially about something that is at the very core, their true belief system. So, this radicalized ideology tested some people on the train. More than a few. In fact, every single one within ear shot, from this caboose to the next.

"The Twister is by-and-large considered a—"

VILLAIN.

"Hero!"

It was an outright witch hunt now, against Berry. "You better run, boy." Betta tried his damndest to shut Berry up, but that never worked. He splashed him, pinched him, bit him, thrashed him. Nothing was working. "1-2-3, dodge, 1-2-3," Berry was murmuring, attempting to get Berry to breathe, and to dance away from the various things being thrown at him now by people. Humans. With much bigger punches than his little fins could serve.

As the group heightened its risk towards its hopeful reward, cornering Berry and Betta, "it's been nice knowing you."

"Clarification!" The ticket-taker burst in to announce a clarification, in case you didn't gather that. "What?" The people didn't gather it at first, so it was worth re-iterating, in earnest.

A dad decked out in holiday gear, held Berry by the collar and yelled to the ticket-taker, "Yeah! Do it! Clarify your policy to this hater on making him shut up!"

I will not shut up!

The ticket-taker railroaded through this interaction, which made absolutely no sense out of context to them, in order to perform their job: stating a true misfortune, the second misfortune they had the displeasure of announcing on this day. "What you previously heard over the intercom was incorrect, "the path of the PATH has been cleared."" The confused crowd clapped.

Stop clapping!!

Yes, stop clapping. "That was the incorrect part. What the horribly outdated system failed to deliver in its messaging was that, the path of the PATH has NOT been cleared."

Heads watched on, with no thoughts, no synapses of connection between their separate headed ears.

"We are headed back to the city. No stops in New Jersey." The ticket-taker said, debarking the compartment to yell the same thing, again and again from cart-to-cart. Have you ever envied a delivery less than this? Only, they would have to do so much faster with each caboose they had gotten to, for behind them grew a resounding displeasure. All of that anger that had begun towards Berry and his guilty-by-association fish Betta, was now off pause and streamlining head-first towards the announcer. The mob chased that announcer to the front of the train, and along with it, collecting more of the same! Or so the legend foretells. Berry never saw past the end of the caboose. He stood, alone in the cabin and wondered what steps to take next.

This was a very misfortune day, indeed. To have traveled by almost-bus, to almost-cab, on to chasing foot, through scribbles and on towards a now almost-12-hours-detoured-train-route, Berry may have stood on the path but this was--

This is NO PATH I CARE TO BE ON!!

"1-2-3-3-listen to me. Let's count to three and breathe."

But did Berry have any interest in listening to his Betta? His closest friend, and dare I say it... advisor? Berry handled this truth as you can imagine. With humility and grace? No, he jumped out of a moving train with a furling final insult that is everyone's actual favorite--

I told you so!!! Villains. Villainssss!

And didn't it feel good to state? For the people were angry, just like him. Though perhaps not angry enough to jump from a moving train at his ripe old, old age?!

"No!! Berry! NOOOOO!" Screamed Betta as the two jumped. One decidedly, and the other in tow.

Chapter Seven

Berry barely thought through this course of action. I mean, come on, jumping* from a moving train car** with a fish bowl, in the middle of nowhere*** with no cell phone?

* and ** Not entirely true, and slightly overly-exaggerated as the train was just barely beginning to nudge forward. So, the jump was more of a stepping-off.

***The middle of nowhere couldn't be further from the truth, for this is one of the most sprawling metropolis' in the country, but let's let these two have their flair and moment.

Now that that's cleared up, let us ask ourselves, instead-- while we await the screams and profanities to subside from a very old, tired,

and hungry man attempting to find his bearings-- truly wouldn't you do the same thing? That's the question: what would you do if you were in his position? Sure, he's a cheap old, old miser (to quote some family members, I would never say this) just trying to get to his nephew on the holidays (not that that was a factor to him, in totality, but it is a factor given that this is the day and season of such a thing). Imagine yourself with no house anymore and your family lives in the FIRST city directly off of the NJ PATH stops. Let me reiterate: Berry's family lives there. I'm talking about the very first stop, alleged seconds from where the train keeps halting. Yes, you probably still wouldn't jump from the (barely) moving train, but with all of the other factors in consideration? Would you? Still no? Well, you are not Berry. You're barely Berry.****

**** Should we trademark this?

Whether you'd take that leap or not, Berry did, and the Betta went with, holding it's gills with it's fins, a true irony, considering its surrounded by water and not about to land anywhere near water, should this jump go wrongly.

Berry has finished his profanities. We are clear to press on with the story--

This fucking shit. Can't trust anyone these days. Stranded... wherever this is. God-

Almost. We were almost clear. Berry moves forward at a glacial pace, his typical pace, towards a direction that appears opposite of the city.

Yes. This is towards my nephews house. I will be there in a matter of fucking minutes.

Berry was not, in fact there in a matter of minutes...

Chapter Eight

Dun dun.*

*This is set to licensed music, but as I've merely typed two consecutive words, they can exist without trademark infringement. I am sure the two words side-by-side provoke said music in your head, royalty free. They are the exact vibe for what is transpiring, currently. If you know, you know. If you don't... just picture looming, scary, daunting, tragic stuff. Capeesh?

A helicopter circles overhead, while a journalist revs on with, "Live from Channel Five news, we are on the quest for a missing old, old man. His family grows concerned with each waking hour, that he will not turn up. If you see this man, who goes by a synonymous and unhelpful first name, exclusively: much like that of Adele or Madonna, please contact the local authorities. His name is Berry. Which now that I'm hearing it back, there's really only two people in this

entire country with that name. So, it works. He was last seen carrying a Betta fish, fleeing the moving PATH train last Christmas, and was headed towards Pennsylvania. From eye-witness news 5, I am--

Cut that off, cause we don't need to hear them plug their name. Why do broadcasters always do that? Lack of compulsion skills? Do they not know that the business card has been invented? It's eerily similar to when a musician plugs their name in every song. No "we" not "the best music!" We are (watching) broadcasters (and we don't need that, thank you). Let's now cut to:

Somewhere in the NE quadrant of Pennsylvania, a bombastic 29 hours from where we last left him, at roughly 29.17 hours walk west from his nephews house, Berry stands. He stands guard over a fort he built, filled with makeshift wind chimes, which is quite an impressive feat. For a man that has never resulted to time in the wilderness, ever, he not only is maintaining his livelihood but he has even had time for art? "Ching ting siiiiiing," ring in the barking wind chimes, right on cue. Berry, as you may remember, but it need be pointed out, carried nothing but himself and his fish. No clothes. No tools. Nothing. Which is why it may not shock you when you see that he is draped in tree bark and is adorned with a woven pine straw hat, it's honestly quite impressive. And would be, in totality, if he wasn't smothered in a thick casing of (what he believes to be) mud...**

**Any guesses what it actually is? Personally, I have had a shitty enough week and will not be extrapolating further.

The Betta looks on to Berry, concerned, but not enough to splash him from his grand delusions and into this particularly harsh "reality," for he, himself, is quite happy, and fat. Betta takes up a sixteenth of his tank now and moves quite slowly due to all of his added weight. The viscosity flowing around the ever-growing boundaries that composite his total circumference are jolly and feel so nice. Unlike Berry's "new home,**" Betta's bowl is pristine, and freshly decorated with many sunken bones, the remnants of a long forgotten rainbow trout. Which he consumed, alone.

**A fort only a caveman could envy. Speaking of cavemen--

Ahhhhhoioioi alllllaaaaaaala oiiiiiii.

Berry now envisions himself a local Tarzan, and speaks as one. Further evidence that he is thriving in the wild. From some viewpoints, outside of his own, he couuuuuuld be. The words are fun and the gibberish is interesting! Yes, I too like it. But that could just be the rare wooded-mountain disease talking for us both. Yes, Berry contracted something ghastly 13 minutes into his journey from a prevailing tick. That was 78 miles and 74 days ago. We are far into that ill-fated, emphasis on ILL, journey now. Buckle up.

Aiiiiiiiiilllllll--

Hate to cut him off, but there's no sense in typing just how he utterly useless his nonsensical words are at this stage of the game. As the expert on these matters, as one fluent in Berry, I have done us both the service of translating, hence forth, what he says (you're welcome).

*We are out of need!!!****

***Wasn't that worth the translation?

"And fish," spoke Betta, no longer telepathically, but quite audibly. Berry had always felt he communicated well with his Betta. Ever since he met him that fated night 28 months ago in a Chinese restaurant nearest his house. Berry doesn't like to travel far, usually. Another reason this entire forrest journey is so... impressive. On October 13, during a Friday luck special, Berry was gifted Betta as a "side" by a perceptive receptionist.

I didn't order any fish? I got the chicken. And this one isn't even cooked.

"No. This is for you. This is for purpose." She said, shutting the blinds of her register with great dramatic flair. They were thin, cheap blinds. Berry could have easily spoken through them, or continued to argue by stepping one step in either direction (left or right) had he so chosen. But he didn't. As soon as he laid eyes upon Betta, he just knew.

Purpose? Why?

OK he didn't quite know and he did argue a little. But not much. He could have lifted the blind and handed Betta back. "Because you are such a sad, sad man." The woman spoke through her thinly shielded blinds, continuing with, "You lack purpose. I give you purpose."

Berry didn't feel sad. That was just his face. But, reluctantly, he took the fish.

"Go feed your purpose!"

I've already walked away. The blinds are not thick! I know you saw me walk away! What the fuck do I do with a fish? Now I gotta get a tank, and decorations? What do you put in a tank? Rocks? I gotta get rocks? Who buys rocks? That has to be the singular most offensive thing we can do, ecologically speaking...

By the second week, Berry had to admit that this fish had brought him some joy. A mild amount of pleasure, And maybe even some--

I'm not calling you Purpose. Sounds too much like porpoise, of which you are not. Could get very confusing. For you, not for me. I'll just... I'll call you what you are.

And so, the name Betta was cemented in stone. Well, in rock, at least.

And now, in the middle of the woods, as the season's final snow nestled itself around the surprisingly sturdy fort, Berry could not shake what he knew all along.

My fish talks!! That's one smart fish!

This would be the closest Berry would ever feel in relation to having a child of his own.

Like father like--

But he couldn't express it aloud. He stood comforted enough in the fact that he could communicate with his fish. That was enough. And besides, his head itched something fierce. These conditions didn't provide the best of shampoo, nor really any washing materials. And after a while... well, you start to itch.

Berry stood, itching and itching for-- Oh, did I need to expand upon the fact that Berry, whom is a homo sapien, and Betta, whom is a fish, could communicate with one another? Cause I really wasn't planning to? Makes perfect rational sense to me... Ugh, fine. Berry can hear the Betta: clearly, through clear, intentional dialogue. They actively converse in these quiet woods. They speak beautiful litanies to one another. For example, right now the Betta is saying to Berry, "Fiiiiiiiish. Need more fisssssssh, you stupid, old man." Which isn't rude, not for Berry. This is the kind of harsh discourse he loved and the precise language Berry could get behind.

For perhaps the first time in his entire life, that of hoods adult and child, Berry felt at peace. Berry felt that this makeshift fort, smothered in dirt, was the dependable home he had always needed. This solace was precisely the vision he hadn't envisioned, but needed.

Yes. This is home.

"Here, here. Now fetch. Fetch me a fishhhhh."

And when one feels truly settled like this, that is often the exact moment when shit (the non-"mud" kind) really starts to hit the fan. Life decided to meet Berry in his comfortability and to test his newfound "neutrality," this purpose he had driven his life unto. Would Berry pass the test it threw his way? Undoubtedly: not.

Chapter Nine

These are the truths of Berry on that fated day, and nothing but the truths (of Berry), so help us all.

The Betta would not shut the flipper up about how hungry he was. And Berry's stomach rolled on by with a similar feeling of discomfort, through an unfurling grumble that was undeniable to both parties in earshot.

Feed me.

"Feed me, bitch!"

No. We've had enough food this week.

"What in the Ozempic-shot are you talking about? Get your scrawny ass up. We can't survive like this, eating meals per week, instead of per-day!"

Nothing is necessary, it's all of the mind, you fat fuck.

This was the kind of dialogue Betta despised the most. Not the fat shaming, but the sudden zen-like persona, "You have Ghandi be kidding me! Get up!! And stop playing with that shit!" For, you see, Berry was making some pottery with his "mud" he'd found, in what the makers of the film *Ghost* would like to leave the footage of on the cutting room floor.

Berry stopped re-enacting the crappiest *Ghost* film scene, standing before the sloppiest "mud" puddle this side of the Mississippi and dared venture out into the wilderness so close to dusk, to prove his claim as the hunter/gatherer he was so proud to now be.

Considering we just talked about a big Hollywood movie, I guess it's time for a Montage!

Flash. Berry lifts his head.

Boom. Berry sticks his feet through a patched up boot he found.

Bam! Berry sticks his arms through the jacket he has wielded.

SLAP! Berry slaps himself on the face. There's no coffee.

SWAP! Berry straps up to his belt buckle with some (makeshift) tools! Of which, I dare not even try to describe. Home Depot is out of stock on all of these.

AND WHAM! Pat-pat. Berry places a re-inforced helmet atop his crown of itch, and begins to waddle about.

"You look ridiculous... ridiculously ready! Thank you!" Berry was stuffed with more leaves and bush than any Scarecrow in any local production for *Wizard of Oz* this side of Kansas. But it was worth the measure for extra padded support, in the event he fell anywhere. Sure, it was all incredibly itchy, and no the itchiness had not reduced, as he had hoped. You can't obtain a resisting nature to the itch, you can only ignore it. Or become "zen" from it. But, hey, what's one more itch at this point? Moreover, the red blotches on his skin were bound to connect at some point, why not today?

Not worth it to risk falling and bruising.

Not at his age! Better to be precautious, and always: prepared.

Two treacherous steps outside of his campsite, Berry stepped in it, the precarious hole he had gotten his attmeptive non-Ghost-worthy-pottery from. He hobbled out of it as quickly as he hobbled into it, and continued on his way.

No more hinderances. This path is the way. It is easy and I walk it well.

Such a zen sounding quote when typed up like this, but remember he's yelling gibberish into the wind, indecipherably for the untrained ear.

Berry, with his newly re-"muddied" foot before him, he trotted towards the stream.

The stream was narrow. Shallow, and lacking any sign of wildlife. The fish were non-existent. How had he managed to capture all of these previous fish?

How the hell did I catch these fish before? No, no. I mustn't doubt!

Like all things in the woods, Berry felt this came through the acts of a divine intervener, a higher purpose.

Being in the woods takes the importance away from society's need for exactness. The stream moves and it is new, always changing.

I won't quote the rest, I think he's just quoting the song from Pocahontas.

I don't remember everything!!! And I don't fucking need to. It's a fish. I'll catch it.

Berry waited for a fish for what felt like 50 minutes.

I've been waiting for an hour!!

OK, so it felt ten minutes longer than even I translated, initially. My bad. In truth, neither were correct. It was much closer to 7 minutes. But this is Berry's truth. Let's not correct him and just let him live through whatever clock and time zone he and his divine intervener live upon. Ohmmmm. Ohmmmm. Try it, be zen. It might help--

There's nothing in this stream! Fuck this stream!! I am man. I will hunt.

Berry lifted his itchy helmet, shuffled some of the debris contained within (to be interpreted: leaves) and removed the spit-tube, and its arrows from within. He had forged this himself. Which was impressive? But you saw how wobbly the pots he was making were. The man is covered in shit, can you imagine that this is going to be very effective?*

*Spoiler alert?

Berry moved in a zig-zag pattern.

Got to stay quiet. Keep them off my trails.

This movement was loud as hell.

They mustn't see me coming, so that I can hunt most effectively! I am man, see me hunt.

Alas, in the widened tall weeded grass, poking now above the melting snow banks, he crept. It took a great deal of time to get down to this level, and was done so only with a loud groan, but he made it.

Grrrrrrrrreat!

Being without a TV for so long, you'd be amazed just how much the capitalistic society has scorched itself unto our brains. Berry was reduced to quoting commercials, like Tony the Tiger at random. What else was there to do? Nothing. There was nothing left to do but to wait for the animals to come towards him and graze.

Then I will shoot them with my expansive lungs, using my handy killing arrow dart with ONE blow and the hunt will end!

The reeds rested, cushioned on the whispering breeze from a dwindling chill. Humidity hung low--you know what? This isn't *The Old Man and the Sea*. This is Old, Old, Old Man in the Woods. And it's more depressing, tepid and slow. I don't find this particular bit of description, in the waiting, to be particularly interesting. Do you? I imagine not, as you've never even read *Old Man and the Sea*. I'll save you the trouble, because it's HemingWAY too boring.

So, let's do this instead. While we wait, would you like a short story? I don't have one, as I am particularly long winded... but that does sound nice. A nice little distraction? Maybe I'll just pop off and make some cookies real quick. All this talk about hunting does weirdly have me hungry? How revolting. Oh, I have Pumpkin flavored ones leftover from the holidays I could make! But why do I have to cook them at 425 degrees? Doesn't that sound really high? Why are chocolate chip cooked so much lower? Great, now I've gotta Google that. Ugh. The digital age is so annoying. If you don't know everything, you know nothing. Or whatever ChatGPT's slogan is.

There are no fucking animals out here. I'm going to starve to death!!

On cue, as always, Berry speaks up. Berry attempted various animal noises, none of which sounded remotely like any animal on this plane of existence. Perhaps ones from the plane that "Dr." Seuss existed upon? But, seeing as none of those are present and accounted for, we can neither confirm nor deny.

Enough of this horse shit.

Like most people, Berry didn't think well when hangry. Betta had joked about his sugar issues, with that Ozempic joke, and though Berry didn't have such sugar issues that would deem a shot necessary, he was suffering from a sugar crash. Recklessly impatient, with true abandon, Berry decided to venture further. Further than he had told himself he would... ever again.

The place in which his hut was situated was a sweet spot, on high enough ground that he could oversee many things, and without enough of a ledge for anything to jump atop the truly and surprisingly sturdy roofing.

It had taken many a Swift fortnight in order to find such a situation. He'd tried two locations before, one of which had collapsed, and another (a cave) which was... preoccupied. Imagine a bear chasing Berry. That didn't happen, but what a visual it is, no?

For the first time since decidedly sitting in such a camp, Berry ventured further from the nest. A daring task! In order to do so, he needed to mark the trees in his wake. Clawing, bare fisted, at the bark upon each tree as he walked further away, Berry left a trail, for himself, in order to get back.

I'll be back, Betta!

What drove him to venture further, was equal parts desperation (to be interpreted: hunger) and the foreseeable disappointment from his beloved friend, Betta. Since that fated Christmas, Betta had become his very own Tiny Tim. And to see him in such a manner would make him, by all accounts, a modern Scrooge.

We can't have that.

In the throes of absolute need to please him, Berry clawed at tree after tree walking into the unknown.

Do you want to piss off a Betta fish? Would you let that little face down? With or without Tiny Tim's crutch, it was too much to think upon.

Betta needs his feed.

Before one more clawing mark, Berry turned and could make out the smallest speck of his camp site. He waved to his friend, with many splintered barks dangling from his long, grungy nails. With this, he ventured towards a hopeful settlement of food.

Smoke hovered over the trees.

Chapter Ten

Berry entered a trancelike state.

Food. Food. Yes, yes. Food. Search. Step, step.

It would have been rather iconic, had Berry looked remotely sane while doing this. Rumor has it that there were coyote, hanging back. Fox, afraid to leave their holes, and birds that refused to fly as he passed by them. "Better stay the fuck indoors. Too many crazies out today," the rumor mill lingers on the words of an anonymous bunny's thoughts.

Berry sipped water droplets from the leaf of a trusted branch. He had had come to know which leaves to trust after once mistakenly sipping from the subtle nectar of a leafy poison oak... Never again. Such disastrous results that first week proved, on his private *Survivor* season.

Much has been learned. Food. Food. Yes, yes. Food. Smoke?

Something was burning, and it wasn't just his curiosity. Clawing at the trees, as he stepped purposefully towards these smells. Ah! Berry loved the wilderness. Which is a thought one would never think could be thunk by such a clear born-and-raised city person.

Perhaps there really is something to this city mouse, country mouse fable, after all. Though... that would require a swap. And I don't have an alternate.

As Berry continued ripping apart the sides of innocent trees, he felt it. Not just the splinter before him, but the true call of destiny.

Purpose. I love being fucking alone. Depending on no one. Living off the land, for myself.

Berry rounded the corner. He was close, approaching the smell of that particular wood. This is a forest after all. The delicious smell of burning wood: a fire. And upon it? A roast.

Campers??

Repress your sarcastic retorts back. No, Bear aren't exactly known for cooking a pot roast. But Berry has been out here the same number of days as his age. Give it a beat.

Berry removed his "helmet" and utilized that "arrow" to scrape each each tree faster than the previous, an object that finally showed its own purpose with as he made his way towards--

A van!

--a van.

Opportunity, at last!

There, upon a small personal grill, were the unattended patties, numerous. He counted at least four patties from where he stood. Doubted it for a second. He's not known for his eyesight. Nodded, and

licked his crusty lips. These were nearing a good browning. Scanning the area, he could see the slight jostle of the van. Either a lover's situation, or a lover's quarrel. Either way, this was none of Berry's business.

That's none of my business!! Food. Food. Yes, yes!

Berry stepped forward delicately, side-to-side, so as to make no noises. This was not achieved, for he was always loud as hell and being in a forest amplifies this times a thousand. Do you also find that when attempting to be quiet, you become louder? Or just Berry?

Step. Step.

The branches, and leaves once covered by snow were out and crunching loudly beneath his feet. "What was that?" Three horrifying words seemed to ricochet from the van of ill-repute. Imagine or expressed, Berry did not have time to ascertain. He grabbed three meats with his bare hands and threw them into his helmet. He ran forward, no longer caring to zig, nor zag. If they were to find him, now would be the time! But wait--

I need condiments!! Where is the mayo??

You can take the man out of the city, but you can't take it all. Berry ran back up his mark'd trail, towards his home.

Food, success, yes. Yes!

Then, it cocked back. He heard the pull of a rifle. A shot gun was fired. Berry ran faster, assuming that the markings would save him. As if the fingers that made these would extend from each tree and pull him forward. They did not. He dare not look back, only forward.

Food, success. Step. STEP. All of this for some medium-rare beef? Worth it.

Berry ran and ran himself right into a mess. In the middle of a clearing, it became clear, he wasn't following any markings at all. He was running in a circle.

Fool! Who did these? What a waste of time.

He winced, plopping down into the opening he was now upon.

Where do I go? How do I get home?

He thought, between bites of the first medium-rare patty. He was waiting for tears to come to him, spiraling about his long lost Betta friend.

Betta!!! Betttttttaaaaaaa!

The tears did not come, but it is the thought that counts. Berry pulled his make-shift helmet to his chest, in solidarity and finished the first beef patty. It felt like an act of betrayal to eat while his friend suffered in potential starvation. But that surely didn't stop him from chowing down.

This is freaking delicious! Still needs mayo. And a little sage.

Berry plucked up something green he mistook as sage and chucked it into his mouth. It was grass. And to a sophisticated pallet it would have tasted like grass. But to Berry, sophistication was a world he no longer subscribed to.

After sitting here for a considerable amount of time, during the digesting of his blades and beef, it dawned on Berry that no one had followed him.

Nobody followed me?? They just shot at me and left me for dead? Sick fucks!

Then, the sounds of a nearby engine cranked. Berry knew the van, his only current source of food, was leaving.

Waiiiit. Waiiiit.

To which the van goes (would have) heard--

Roaaaaaaaar. Roaaaaaaaar!

Berry rushed to follow the sound, looking ungodly. To see such a sight would propel forth fear, both abject and reticent. For his zagged walk now added a hobble to its merits. The food was good to his belly, but the soles of his shoes were not. His left foot shot through the opening of the foot, and was only being held together by laces and a prayer.

Must walk. Fast!

The walk back towards the van was painful. And with sounds that competed against the vans own, Berry growled with that howling issue.

Oooooooooow'll re-trace my steps. Just a few more feet. Just a few more feet. Just a few--

You get it. He was chanting, like it was a mantra. Just repeating his grunts and gripes over and over and over. It can help someone to focus as they move about, this intention. But for those in the vicinity of it (the listener, or in this case the reader), it is just monotonous (to be interpreted: annoying). Berry was winded by the time he found the grill, unoccupied.

Capitalists. Literers! Who leaves a perfectly good piece of equipment behind?

But this is just what he had needed, a good piece of equipment. What fortune!! This was a Christmas miracle! Whatever day it was, this was just that: a present. Given the nature of where he was, it would make sense if that was USPS that had delivered it, themselves.

Thank you USPS!

Berry picked up the grill! And quickly threw it back down.

Ow. Hot hot hot hot--

Berry ran to the edge of the forest, where some remaining snow stood, as the afternoon light trickled down its last few beams and berated himself with the pounding of each fist into that snow. How could he not have put the two and two together, before lifting the grill? Such a juvenile mistake. In all of his many, many years he knew that a hot surface, aka a grill, particularly a grill that was just on would equate to hot.

Duh. I must be hungry. I don't think well when I am hungry. This is because I need to eat more.

In truth, Berry would've used any excuse to eat a second patty. His friend did not need to consume an entire patty, anyway.

Fish eats too fucking much.

Berry removed his helmet to look at the remaining patties. He picked off some pieces of leaf and chucked it into his mouth. The whole patty, at once.

Two are left.

This is turning into some count-with-me booklet, ugh! He ate that one as well. But too fast. What he truly needed was water, but we don't have time to discuss that whole issue.

Berry choked some of the undigested bits of beef back up, swallowing all that he could. It was vile. Repulsive. And he felt despicable, but justified in doing so. There were, after all, three patties left. The choking lingered a little bit, so he stood and moved around as he awaited for both choking to stop and for the grill to cool. Shoving his previously burned fists into his stomach, he was able to dislodge the last bit that was stuck.

Poof!

The beef shot forward onto a tree, and low and behold that tree had the markings of a genius (to be interpreted: lucky son of a gun with his little) cookie trail. Berry, the little Hansel to this story, looked up and thanked the heavens. He grabbed his temperament grill, pressed it to his chest, and moved slowly towards his house. Things were really coming together.

I'm cooking with gas now!!

Another marking! Another tree.

Grill, grill! Yes, yes! Grill, grill. Step, step!

The previous eyes cape had faltered him because he was looking straightforward. The real key was to look side to side. Yes, the visible markings revealed themselves in a zig-zag pattern along the way as he sloooooooooowwwwwly, ever so sloooooooooooooowly trailed home. When he finally made it, it was nightfall.

I'm back!! I did it!

He said bursting into a home of total silence. Betta was not asleep though. What he was, was immediately distrusting of Berry's behavior.

I didn't betray you, Tiny Tim. I mean, Betta.

For Betta didn't enjoy this comparison. In truth, Betta resented all literature comparisons. Not only because he was a fish, and therefore "could not read," but because he felt that if he were to be enclosed in a book it would have to be a brand new one. Betta's book was yet "Unwritten." But that feeling was most likely influenced due to the Chinese restaurant he came from having always played the pandora playlist for Natasha Bedingfield music.

I was able to get one patty. But I'll let you have half!

Betta scoffed. What a ridiculous, and obvious lie. Berry's color was much improved. His heart rate was clearly elevated, and not just from exercise. But that of an elevated blood pressure, one that could only come from the consumption of such clear and obvious red meat. The sweat beading down his face made apparent that it was in vast quantities. Having not had beef for some time, Betta knew the inevitable was on its way-- a shit storm. Betta wasn't insensitive, but he lacked a filter, both in the tank and in his mind. He pushed further, "Oh really?"

Yes, really. What do you think I'm gonna do? Not feed you?

"I think you're holding out on me--"

I'm offering you half of what I could find!

"So this is everything you found?"

Yes.

"Then... where'd the grill come from then, Berry?"

Berry was stumped. His brain wasn't working as fast as it did in the city. All of this damn peace and solitude had really slowed down his wit and timing.

Fucking mantra bullshit. I'm getting to it, just give me a moment!!

"You mean to tell me that I am to believe you found a grill in the middle of the woods, without any explanation, oh! There it is. And upon it you found one completely normal, singular, recently made beef patty with it? Stacked upon it, pristinely? I guess you're right. No further explanation is needed."

Nope.

"No? No. That didn't happen, Berry? Or no you don't know how to explain yourself? Cause from where I'm looking, you are lying. You clearly had more than one of these precious patties on this "alleged hunt." I may be a fish, but I am no dummy. No hunt acquires perfectly rounded beef patties. These are clearly store bought, perhaps purchased, but definitely formed and cooked!"

I'm a great hunter!!!

"Liar!!!!"

Fish.

"Homo sapien!!! "

Ok, then I can eat it by myself if this isn't the truth, then!!

"1, 2--" But really it was more of a 3, 2... for as soon as Berry dropped Betta's half into his dome, he had to remove himself to the "outhouse" (to be interpreted: a large hole in the ground 15 paces down-wind from the camp), in order to drop his own "beef patties off at school." This is a sentence I regret typing.

Ahhhhhhhhh!

Betta ate in peace while Berry screamed into the night.

It's coming outta me like lava.

In truth, it was. "That's what you get for lying. You ate way more than half a beef patty, Goldilocks."

As Berry continued to scream, Betta nestled into the rejuvenated atmosphere of his bowl. "I'm gonna sleep good tonight."