

P hilosophy of a S uperfluous o o o C ouple

By

Tom Ball

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...* Tom Ball is one of the higher ups here at Fleas on the Dog, which usually means about three things at the beginning of my spiel: 1) an admission that he controls all of our fates, 2) an acknowledgement that he can put in whatever he feels like – which is fine, and 3) an overall statement about why none of that matters and that “Philosophy of a Superfluous Couple” is a story well deserved to be in the ranks of any magazine – especially FOTD.

Our narrator is a 38-year-old, self-classified, superfluous person. After a degree in geology, a Masters in archeology, teaching English in countries throughout the world, writing books (which, for him, could be classified as just another right-above-banal thing) that never seem to get accepted by the mainstream publishing companies, and finds himself useless in society. One day, he meets Persephone, another truly superfluous person – her novels, too, never seem to grab the attention of any publisher. Thus begins the congruous superfluity of our intelligent, yet ostracized, couple and their imaginative hijinks that follow.

Treatises on the necessity of imagination in society, political parties that start hot and fade, a group of imaginers, sort of a league of superfluous gentlepeople, a few more books (because there was time in between), are all created and largely ignored no matter how many others join, contribute, or produce.

You can sort of see the pattern beginning to form here and I won't beleaguer it much longer.

Imagination is the frontrunner of this story and Ball not only uses it to create such a clever little narrative but also to deconstruct the creative process and the follies that come from creating your own art.

I think that if you have ever written something, a story, a poem, etc., you would be on the rarer side of writers if you had never shared your work or been a part of some reading or even been to a workshop. What I mean to say is that, in some way, everyone takes their imagination and shares it with other like-minded people. Sharing and connecting with others may make your work better, it may make your work worse, it may tear your spirit down to listen to other's imaginative problems in their own creation, or you may feel inspired to something, anything, but almost always you will fall down the imaginative hole.

The imaginative hole is where one idea tends to breed six and six turns into about twelve, and by twelve you have less of an idea and more of a jumbled mess that usually just gets discarded and ignored and that pile of dirty laundry on the floor.

That is metaphor that Ball brings forth in this story. You see people who, at all times, are the most imaginative people around, but they never get anything done because their

imagination force them to spiral to the point of non-committal. They are a special type of victim. Those with large enough imaginations to tell themselves they're something, but smart enough to know that it never gets them anywhere, and, in their own perceived space in society they feel shunned to the point of action. A beautiful, imaginative loop.

"Philosophy of a Superfluous Couple," is intelligent, humorous, witty, and a damn fine metaphor for the way in which imagination can infect the writing process (and all the little groups, magazines, and publishing follies that follow).

I truly suggest that you read this story.

Five Stars.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)

"Success is measured, to me, in how many people you have inspired to do good things in your life." He said, "Success in itself is inspirational." So, we took a cruise from NYC to the Azores, and he knew some of the yachties there. They were raising children at sea and claimed to have had an adventurous life. One man told us, "I was a poet and had written a lot of lyrics for a rock band." The band was obscure but the lyrics were deep like, "At sea/ One learns to live off the Earth/ And the Earth was crazy and all the creatures in it/ It was a World of peril and suffering/ And one needed to keep your eyes on the prize/ which was immortality/ To create music for the ages/ Is something everyone gauges/ And although it is madness/ It is good/ Live life as a crazed persona/ Is the way to be."

PHILOSOPHY OF A SUPERFLUOUS COUPLE

By TOM BALL

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CHAPTER 1: OUR BACKGROUND

I could solve most crosswords and had an IQ of 198 (200 is the max). But I opted for a geology degree, which was largely useless. Then I traveled around teaching English before returning home to NYC where I did a master's degree in archeology, but as an archaeologist, I languished on the poverty line. I could barely afford beer, the only thing that made me happy. I was now 38 years old and white... living in NYC.

In my geology studies in university, I questioned why supercomputers couldn't predict the weather long term and questioned whether the World was heating up of its own accord as it had been more or less doing since the end of the last ice age and maybe we would all be surprised by global cooling. I said to various people, "Sure it's bad to pollute, but who knew what the result would be?" And I believed there was a power source at the Earth's core.

Then I studied a Master's in archaeology. I figured human beings as we know them have been around for hundreds of thousands of years and had colonized the Americas crossing the Bering land bridge hundreds of thousands of years ago. And we needed to use Ground Penetrating Radar to find prehistoric sites. And zoom in on our ancestors. But ultimately, I figured there wasn't much to find; better to write books of the future.

When I went to the bar all alone, in my travels, I often met girls who were amazed by my wit and a few of them told me I should really do something great with my mind. So finally, I started

to write, I wrote a book about being superfluous. I wrote in my own style, which was really a series of short pieces about varying useless people. Some, like me were superfluous. Others were just plain useless.

Persephone was a girl who was smart but married a rich man at age 20 and didn't have to work. She was just his love slave but really had no positive impact on peoples' lives and had no children. And her husband had many affairs, but she put up with them as she loved him. She tried learning to paint pictures but found she couldn't do anything new with painting and this discouraged her. Then she tried to write a novel about her life, her struggle. But no publisher was interested even though she had some deep insights into life and what it meant to be useless. She started to feel superfluous and began writing about it. Finally, she divorced this man, at age 33 and hung out with me. We quickly fell in love. We were both philosophers and both believed strongly in human imagination and we both believed we were superfluous...

So, then I wrote a book about my romance with Persephone, set in the future. We drove an air car and participated in orgies (all sex diseases had been cured) and read one another's minds and were eternally youthful. But today, we were hypnotizing one another to love only one another. Persephone and I were both failures and were both lost and superfluous.

I was spending most of my working hours teaching English Online. It was a hangover from my days as a teacher abroad in many countries. I'd taught in Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Indonesia, Hungary, Czech Republic, Niger and Russia. She worked as a newspaper columnist/ reporter.

Then one night we had an argument. I told her, “You are useless to me. You don’t inspire me!” She said, “I feel the same about you.” But we stayed together all the same.

“My latest book was, “Tales of Madness.” Like one day there was a singer who thought she would sing madly despite the cold and a group of homeless people joined her and sang along in semi-harmonious voices. They sang in the center of the modest city and had a screen behind them which displayed art that they had designed just for this singer. And as time went by she wrote her own songs and now had a full choir backing her up. Finally, a record company from the big city picked her and her choir up and they released an album called, “Psychedelic Winter” which was about a nuclear winter in which everyone was dying, and the choir painted paintings of it. Art in the Apocalypse!

And another book was about a madman who became the most famous man in Brunei by writing tales of madness like once upon a time there was a man who was President of the USA who took LSD often and made colorful, mad speeches like saying things like things look pretty grim, but imagination would save the day. Everyone would be forced to do at least one imaginative thing per day and people got the hang of it as imaginative behavior was rewarded with riches and fame. But some said imagination was all madness and everything would end badly for the President. And sure enough, one day a man he trusted caused him to overdose on LSD and he ran about shouting and screaming until finally a pedestrian shot him for accosting him.

And another book was about a man who was King of Sheep. He lived on Mars and all his subjects were morons and looked very foolish. The King enjoyed sex with the females and played drinking games with the men. Everyone was a drunkard. But the King said, "Unusual behavior was sublime and even humorous. Like having sex with androgynous people and trying to be a thinker.

And Persephone said, "The tales were a grotesquerie and grossed me out." I replied, "Why don't you tell me about your latest stories!" So, she said, "Once there was a couple of star-crossed lovers who got locked up in a criminal mental asylum for trying to break into an asylum and helping their friend to escape. In the asylum they were both raped and abused and finally they killed themselves. Another one was about a selfish man who never did a good thing for anybody. But he went to Heaven, just like everyone else. And ruined peoples' Heavenly experience. And still another about a useless man who nobody liked, and he died miserably."

We were both writers, but no publisher of any size liked our work. People asked, "Why don't you two do something useful with your fine brains?" I resolved to form a rock band with me on guitar and Persephone singing. We wrote lyrics now as well as books. And we harmonized well together, as I sang too! One day I told Persephone, "In this World of madness, you and I will not survive long." We were both alcoholics and smoked a lot of grass which was bad for our lungs.

I said, "There are some people who are crazier than us!" She said, "We give new meaning to the words, 'mad love.'" I said, "I'd do anything for you, no matter how crazy!" She said, "Let's

try and be calm and sane for a day!” So, we tried it, and in the morning, I put solidified laughing gas in her breakfast cereal, and she loved the maid who was a moron. And so, the day went.

The next day I asked her in all sincerity, “How we could be useful to our fellow human?” She replied, “I think we should start a political party, the imaginative party.” I said, “Brilliant! We could draw up a mad manifesto in which, everyone should be rewarded for imaginative ideas. And people could spend their time trying to make sense of the reality that we are all useless and life is meaningless.” She said, “Reality makes me sick. It is so arbitrary and mindless. We need imaginative solutions. Like for example, elect the most imaginative people to positions of power. Often such people are relegated to obscurity and if they try and write, they can’t find a big publisher, and die in obscurity. We have plenty of good ideas amongst the population, I am sure! We just need to harvest them like we were intellectual farmers. I know a man who said, ‘Most people are malleable, and we can make them into anything we want. It is just a matter of education and hypnotism to convince them to join us!’” I said, “We need to use search engines to find imaginative people and not look at those who are published under big publishers. We’ll find the people who should matter! And turn the tables on the establishment who want everyone to follow the status quo. Shake things up a little!” So, we began our search. And gave up on the musical band idea for a while.

CHAPTER 2: WE BEGIN OUR SEARCH

One of the first people we found in our search was a woman, Doris, a black American of 30, who said, “We all have our roles to play in the script, only now we need to use all the best people in power. Using scientists, artists and entrepreneurs who are hesitant to strive for power, to give them a soap box to speak from.” And she said, “All it takes is a little cajoling and friendliness.” And she said, “The ideal persona will take every idea and try and improve on it. Political ideology will become like a sculpture in the making. First off, we need to care for the poor and unfortunate and especially those who are clever but have fallen on barren ground. Then we need to consider the views of those who are radicals and don’t succeed in school and life. We want radicals to be Princes and Princesses of our modern World. Radicals who are in obscure but great rock bands, marginalized writers and artists, all those who are really brilliant but can’t find success.”

Another radical, Bob, a white American of 55, we found said, “Old age should be a privilege for the most imaginative, those who are dull and boring should only be allowed a short life, yet all would be given a chance to show what they can do!” I said, “Such a World would be ideal, but hard to pull off!” Persephone said, “The idea is brilliant. An ‘imaganocracy’” I said, “The most imaginative could meet and inspire one another and the imagopolice could arrest people for being boring. It would be cruel but would be paradise.” But Bob said, “Many are violently against me, and I feared for my life, but was confident I could avoid assassination.” I said, “Yes, some would consider it a type of genocide, but technology is crying out for progress, and we have to follow the beat of that drum.” Persephone said, “Most people are just killing time in life

and do no good works or imaginative deeds. And children should only be allowed for those who have led an interesting life.” I said, “But the people will rise up and revolt! And give us the guillotine.”

Another radical, Julie, a Hispanic American of 41 we found said, “The most imaginative, best lovers should lead us in a loving society in which the best lovers are the richest, most famous people. The best lovers would share their techniques and philosophy with everyone else, thereby improving everyone!” I said, “Imagination is like a bottomless pit, you can always go deeper.” Persephone said, “To truly fall in love with a great lover is the best feeling, regardless of whether or not your true love loves you!”

Another good radical we found, an Arab American of 34, named Persimmon said, “She was kept down by her religion, but had an idea to make all religions believe in free love.” I said, “Free love is nothing new, but to try and force everyone to follow free love is new. In the 1960s free love was like a juggernaut that seemed unstoppable, but somehow it petered out.” Persephone said, “Soon as they cure herpes and AIDs free love will come again.”

Yet another radical, a female, named Nicole, a white American of 29, said, “I wanted to break through the wall that is society and live in paradise for all. Such a paradise would involve true freedom and it would be against the law to try and curtail another’s freedom.” I said, “The freer you are, the more you impinge on others’ freedoms.” She said, “Within reason of course.” Persephone said, “In history it has always been such a struggle to be free, now true freedom seems possible.” And she said, “To fight for freedom is to have use!” I said, “First we need to

convince people that they need to be free. Free of marriage, free of wage slavery, free to travel anywhere, free to think as deep as they can, free to buy anything they need such as a home and air car, freedom to take medicine that will prolong youth, free to take drugs of pleasure and so on. And even free children who can choose fun ways to learn.” Nicole said, “Yes, some people are stubborn and say they want to be free but are not and don’t even try!”

Another new friend of ours, PJ, white American of 43, said, “The end of the World is coming through bioweapons. Too many people have access to them, and the spies can’t keep up. We are all rendered useless to do anything about this. It’s out of control.” I said, “Yes there are many things that will bring the World to the end like computer hackers shutting down whole countries, like nuclear war waged by dictatorships destroying whole countries and so on.” And I said, “The only way out is for a group of us like-minded imaginative citizens to seize power and put out the fire. But we will be killed if we fail in all likelihood.”

And we had a new friend, Tim, a Chinese American of 33, who kept telling us, “We were useless like everybody else and there was nothing we could do to change that. Life was meant to be simple and meaningless and that’s what our civilization was. There was no meaning.” I said, “But surely to improve the World for all would have meaning!” Tim said, “There is no meaning and there is no God.” Persephone said, “But we are free to create our own meanings. Everyone has some things that are meaningful to them.” Tim said, “It’s just a dream!”

CHAPTER 3: THE IMAGINATION PARTY

I said, "So far you, Persephone and I have done nothing to improve the World. Do you think World change should be our goal?" She said, "We could try harder, but ultimately it seems futile. No one person can change the World." I said, "But if we get a movement behind us, we could work miracles." She answered, "You are a dreamer, but who knows you might get what you want in the end!"

And we met a physicist, Marjorie, a white American of 39, who said, "I had developed the math for faster than light travel but was scorned by the conservative scientific community." And she said, "Posterity will find me, just like the inventors of the first computers, but I will not succeed in this life I am afraid." I said, "I feel the same about my writing. The conservative publishing industry is so hard to crack when you have an unusual style, like I do!"

And I made love with Marge, Persephone and I believed in free love. I had a great feeling the next day and was determined more than ever to be useful.

Then we met Samuel. Samuel was a Filipino of 30, a seafaring man who said, "I meet the best people while sailing to little known parts of the World!" I said, "You can meet brilliant people anywhere, even in a small town!" He said, "True but to go to a place like NYC everyone knows has more clever people per capita than almost anywhere else and with yachties it is the even more pronounced; most of them are clever and successful." I asked him, "How do you measure success?" He said, "To make a difference and be rewarded with cash!" I asked, "How have you made a difference?" He responded, saying, "I was a stockbroker, and I made a lot of people

rich!” I said, “But most rich people are greedy and selfish!” He said, “People on the whole are greedy and selfish but at least rich people are successful and make others successful too!” I asked him, “Is being successful then the meaning of life?” He replied, “For me it is!” Persephone opined, “Success is measured, to me, in how many people you have inspired to do good things in your life.” He said, “Success in itself is inspirational.” So, we took a cruise from NYC to the Azores, and he knew some of the yachties there. They were raising children at sea and claimed to have had an adventurous life. One man told us, “I was a poet and had written a lot of lyrics for a rock band.” The band was obscure but the lyrics were deep like, “At sea/ One learns to live off the Earth/ And the Earth was crazy and all the creatures in it/ It was a World of peril and suffering/ And one needed to keep your eyes on the prize/ which was immortality/ To create music for the ages/ Is something everyone gauges/ And although it is madness/ It is good/ Live life as a crazed persona/ Is the way to be.” Persephone and I partied in the Azores for a few weeks before returning to NYC.

I said to Persephone, “Some of those yachties made us feel like royalty. But the easy, free life is not for us!” She said, “Yes we are on a road to Hell, but plan to survive all the same.” I said, “Yes we are destined for politics and hard-won policies.” (Of course, we were both founding members of the Imagination party). And our mission was to recruit new members around the USA. People had to prove they were imaginative and did so in numerous ways. But the important thing was we all put imagination first above all other things. Create until death do us part.”

Many of the members of our Imagination party were entranced by the idea that imagination will solve all the World's problems. But typically, one solution led to more challenges. It was an endless cycle but was challenging for all! Persephone opined, "All people need is a challenge in which they play an important role." I said, "To immerse oneself into politics in a new way is the highest of roles. Many people who could make a difference in politics are scared away by having to follow boring party rhetoric and have their good ideas snubbed." And I said, "Few politicians have a true vision for the future. They just want to spend tax dollars in wasteful ways. Even Conservatives/Republicans when in power are beholden to special interest groups and doling out money and power to such groups. Most politicians are corrupt."

And I said to Persephone, "It is a World of power in which the entitled garner money and control. It is usually the rule of the rich. And if the socialists get in, they spend incredible amounts of money, enriching the poor, but it cannot be sustained. We need to create a system in which the poor can succeed! Such as raising dramatically the minimum wage and putting caps on the rate at which real estate can escalate to. And everyone should have health care and dental care as a basic right." She said, "There's no limit to the abuse of one man to another. As if some weren't fully human. One can be like our yachting friend, Samuel, and try to forget about the poor and just worry about the successful people, but this point of view is hardly charitable."

And Persephone told me, she was sick of reporting on the news. "It was all bad news," she said, "And it was a vexation to her spirit." And I said, "I was tired of talking at my English teaching job. And I felt my students were learning very slowly."

So, we quit our jobs and worked only for the Imagination party. We polled the American people about what they wanted in life. Most said love, freedom, a good job and a healthy family. Something like that. We proposed a more imaginative life to them but found they were largely disinterested. We told them, “But the two established parties are dull and boring.” Most of them agreed saying things like, “Better to be dull than dead.”

Persephone said, “I am not so worried about the poor, but rather the poor in spirit. I wish I could inspire everyone to do their best.”

Then we met Alberta, a white American of 50. She said, “You guys are headed in the right direction, but the question is in the end will a substantial number of people back you?” I said, “Good ideas spread like wildfire in this society we live in. And I am confident we will have numerous idea people in our party.” And Persephone said, “Almost everyone deep down wants to do the right things and we are giving them a chance to make a difference.” Alberta said, “But you are trying to lead people into a great unknown and most are content with their life as it exists.” I said, “Everyone though is greedy for more happiness, more satisfaction...”

Then we met Vera, Japanese/white American. She said, “I don’t know how people of your caliber can consider themselves to be useless. I feel you are just what the doctor ordered for this time and place.” I said, “The next election will be a referendum on our mission. We will run candidates in all House and Senate seats as well as Persephone as President. We have still got one year before the next Presidential election in 2028 to get our act together. We have the ideas; what we need now is organization.”

So, we held elections for our new party members to elect candidates. Most of them were former Independents, but there was double digit support in both the Republican and Democratic party supporters for us

I was planning to run as her Vice-Presidential running mate, and we would govern together. But we ended up with just 21% of the Presidential vote and elected only 10 to Congress. Still, it was a start. But my feelings of uselessness returned. Some said, "You are greedy for power." Others said, "You are just a dreamer." I figured I was a dreamer, and an unsuccessful one.

But one day, the government's secret service appeared at my door and warned me to stay out of politics. So, I fell into despair. I told Persephone about, "the visit from the spies." And she said, "They came to me, too!" I asked her "What was our next move?" She said, "If we don't desist we'll be assassinated!" I said, "I think so too." She said, "We'll make it as writers. And she wrote a creative nonfiction tale of our reality." But publishers didn't want to touch it. And so, we both felt useless again. And we disbanded the Imagination party.

And again, I started to write. This time around I wrote Dystopias and was morose. For example, I wrote about a world in which aberrant ideas were punished with death. Some scientists in that World had to work in secret and writers circulated their manifestos in the Underground. But ultimately, they were all caught and sentenced to death.

Another Dystopia I wrote was about was a World of need in which everyone was needy, but the government didn't help them. Some starved, most were alone and lonely. No love attachments, you couldn't see the same lover twice in a year. No one was allowed to have children and most people died very young. If you lived beyond 40, you'd be pressured to kill yourself. So, this civilization was slowly imploding. In the end the only adults left standing were the Oligarchy of 5 men and 5 women, who had test tube babies, grown in an incubator with the women given fertility drugs to produce more eggs. And so, the group had been producing 55 babies every year for 10 years and so now had a total population of 560. They were starting civilization all over again. They resolved to live like Kings, and everyone had the best of everything. And they figured they were all kindred spirits and loved one another intensely. And lived on and on with eternal youth. And looked to the future. But no publisher took my story, and I couldn't get an agent.

Persephone said, "Why don't we set up a charity for struggling artists of all kinds? We could view their work and award grants, only all works would have to be very deep. We could raise money from established writers to pay for the grants." I told her, "It would be enjoyable to meet such people." So, we set up a website that would publish all sorts of media, writing, painting, music, comics, audio books and so on. I said the difference between us, and most other publishers is we are more imaginative. We designed a knockout site and had a number of artists right away. We invited them to stay in our place when they were in New York and finally set up a hostel for artists who could show proof of good artwork. The hostel had a 20-hour bar, open 8 am to 4 am and a library. We got a grant from the state to keep the price of a tiny room to \$75 a night. We found there was a lot of synergy in this bar and many artists came from far away.

CHAPTER 4: THE LEAGUE OF IMAGINATION

One of the women we met was a white American of 44, a hypnotherapist. She said, "I can help struggling artists succeed, using post-hypnotic suggestion." But Persephone and I had seen a stage hypnotist and heard stories of hypnotized people being driven insane by cross-hypnotism. But still we were interested to see miserable starving artists improve and go more mainstream and be happier. We had her hypnotize a couple down and out writers and they perked right up, and we told her to keep hypnotizing people.

Another woman we met, Juliette, an Indonesian of 47, said, "I liked to paint pictures with animals and men of great height or small height. Like painting a farmer with giant dogs or painting a giant who ran about the countryside as if he were King Kong." I asked her, "What was the point?" She said, "Everything is a matter of scale." Persephone said, "There's no point to your paintings!"

And we met a man, Will, who wrote highly artistic love letters to his many female acquaintances. He wrote one to Persephone saying, "People like her keep the World turning and love was in the air all around her. And her scent drove him crazy." And he said to her, "I will never forget you; you have inspired me." So, I told Persephone, "To go ahead and love him."

Anyway, I wanted to love Carrie, a Hispanic American of 32, a musician who made psychedelic music with choirs. She was really sexy, and we sang a duet together. But for some reason this musician was also unsuccessful. But after all we lived in this era of boring, senseless commercial music. I wrote some lyrics for her called "Black Hole," and I loved her for weeks.

Afterwards, Persephone told me, “I thought I’d lost you.” I said, “You know I’d never leave you!”

Then still at the hostel, we met an American gay couple, Petunia and Georgette who were both writers. They said, “We write as a hobby and don’t expect any laurels, but I read one of their books they’d cowritten and it was splendid about a woman who discovered a cure for herpes which set off a free love world trend. It was like the late 1960’s all over again. And the book was full of interesting characters who were inspired by love to do good art. And this scientist in the book was given the Nobel Prize for Chemistry and was the spokeswoman for the new “Love Movement.” I said, “In the meantime while we wait for a cure, we can test everyone at the hostel for STD’s including herpes and AIDS. People will say why not love everyone?”

And I said, “I want to form the League of Superfluous Humans. People who have so much to give but are rebuffed by society. We’ll join such people together and hope for a synergy that would finally make them well known. To be so good, others can’t resist them.” We recruited on the Internet. One of them was a man who’d written, a book about “How I was hallucinating seeing only ruins everywhere where buildings now stood. And I imagined all the people were rotten skeletons.” I said, “What drugs are you on? He said, “My ability to see things for what they truly are or will be is a divine gift of the Gods.” I replied, “Surely you don’t believe in the Gods?” He said, “Anyway I am gifted. But in truth my life is one of horror. I see death and destruction everywhere and I believe the human race is doomed, soon. Whether from nuclear war

or biological war or a cyber virus that can infect the computer user; or genius, but malign hackers.”

TO BE CONTINUED

AUTHOR’S NOTE: We live in an era in which people wonder if they have use. Or are they just superfluous? It seems to me that the best of us are all superfluous and we are all just wasters without meaning in our lives. To try and make a difference is futile. We are going to the stars, but it will be the same existentialist funk for futurians...

AUTHOR BIO: Tom Ball cofounded *Fleas on the Dog* with Charles Pinch in December 2019. He winters in Canada and summers on Mars. If you haven’t had enough of him already go to <https://tomballbooks.com>