

The WART

By Andrew D. Bassford

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...

Andrew D. Bassford's, "The Wart," is like as if Franz Kafka, Kurt Vonnegut, and Etgar Keret had a short story baby.

Alfred is a man stuck in a cubicle, stuck next to coworkers stuck in their own habits, stuck next bosses that wouldn't know meaningless work from their ass because they are, in fact, meaningless. Yet, out of all this repetition, this mundanity, one day Alfred finds the titular wart upon his toe. Even though he is the only one who knows of its existence, its existence, in and of itself, is enough to drive the man into such self-consciousness that he begins snipping, piece by piece, the wart from his body.

What makes Bassford's story so interesting is its absurdity. The events that take place, the actions that become of its characters, almost all seem like they could just as easily be watched in a movie from Charlie Kaufman. But therein lies the beauty of linguistic absurdity, the humor, the horror, the fun, the coy way in which authors dance with you through language, becomes surreal enjoyment.

What brings this piece together is the marrying of absurdity with the mundane – a la Office Space. It's hard not to see both the humor and the utter boredom these characters must face in their day-to-day lives with lines like these,

"The stacks of colored paper were striking against the otherwise dull and whitewashed breakroom walls. She did not hear Alfred approach over the sound of the paper crinkling. She finished her 80th origami swan for the day and seemed pleased at first, but that turned quickly to disappointment. She dropped the paper bird to her right side and then started to fold another sheet."

I've read these lines five times by this point and, more than likely will read them five times more before I'm done, but have chuckled at them each and every

time that I've read them. They are poignant, yet dull, insightful, yet nonchalant, boring, yet farfetched, extravagant, yet squandered. Truly, an enjoyable collection of sentences.

Bassford's, "The Wart," may not be your cup of tea because of its own inherent breaks from the real, but I am here to tell you that you most certainly should give this short, little piece a try – it is a lovely break from reality.

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

With great resolve, he grabbed the scissors from the cup next to his computer screen, and with a swoosh chopped the little toe cleanly off. No toe, no wart. His toe hit the ground just as the two halves of another pencil did so too.

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Down the hall from Alfred's cubicle sat a woman who, all day long, walked back and forth to the bathroom across the hall to wash and rewash her hands. Alfred's cubiclemate was in charge of forms. Next to the forms he kept a bundle of pencils, wrapped tightly with a rubber band. After each form, the man held sideways the pencil he had just used, and then in a sudden jerk snapped it cleanly in half. He let each shard fall to the floor before collecting the bits and depositing them under his desk in a small waste basket. Alfred watched the woman walk again to the restroom, only to 20 seconds later walk back out. He then looked down at his foot. Earlier that morning, Alfred had discovered the existence of a small wart growing on his left little toe. It itched.

Alfred felt ashamed, as though everyone around him was judging him for the wart, even though its existence was recognized by him and him alone. He closed the small blinds dividing him from his cubiclemate. He heard the sharp crack from the wood and granite of his co-workers pencil. And then Alfred untied his shoe to get a better look at himself. The wart was disgusting. Alfred had tried to burn it, but that had failed. And Alfred had tried to freeze

it, but in this endeavor he failed, as well. Another crack as another pencil snapped. Suddenly Alfred had an idea. With great resolve, he grabbed the scissors from the cup next to his computer screen, and with a swoosh chopped the little toe cleanly off. No toe, no wart. His toe hit the ground just as the two halves of another pencil did so too.

Immediately afterwards, Alfred felt a flood of relief. No sooner had the toe touched the floor than it dissolved into nothingness. No evidence left, and no further cause for shame. Alfred retied his shoe, reopened the curtain dividing his cubicle, and then caught sight of the peculiar grimace his cubiclemate makes when doing his work, before heading out into the main office thoroughfare. He heard his boss's voice coming from the lounge area. Alfred walked over to join her. She had placed several large stacks of construction paper on the breakroom's table. She sat at the table with her back to the door. The stacks of colored paper were striking against the otherwise dull and whitewashed breakroom walls. She did not hear Alfred approach over the sound of the paper crinkling. She finished her 80th origami swan for the day and seemed pleased at first, but that turned quickly to disappointment. She dropped the paper bird to her right side and then started to fold another sheet. But Alfred said hello, and so she turned around. It isn't clear what their conversation was about.

But midway through, Alfred suddenly felt a concerning sensation coming from his right little toe. It itched. Alfred immediately lost interest in the conversation, lied that he had more he needed to do, and returned to his cubicle. His cubiclemate noticed his return. They locked eyes; his co-worker took another pencil from the bundle, and he snapped it, without commentary. Alfred returned to his seat. Again, he closed the curtain and threw off his shoe, without untying it this time. He held up his foot. It was just as he had feared: another damn wart. When had this grown? Was it already there and he had just failed to notice it, or had it just now grown? It was uncertain. In any event, experience had taught Alfred how best to respond to the situation. With another swoosh, pencil and toe dropped to the ground.

Alfred felt some relief, though, admittedly, not as much as he had before. He let out a sigh, gazed up at the punctured popcorned ceiling for a few moments, and then once more steadied his gaze in the direction of his

foot. He couldn't believe it: another wart, bigger than any he had seen before, and growing no less across the entire sole of his right foot. Reflexively, Alfred let out a gag sound. It was grotesque, and by association, he was too, he thought. But now the man's resolve faltered. He knew what had to be done to be rid of the wart, but could he really live without that much of himself? His apprehension turned to fear. He put his shoe back on. He had to get up. So he fled to the office thoroughfare again. He took a step, but then on the next, the wart's presence became too overwhelmingly obvious. He looked down at his right shoe. The woman from down the hall brushed past him on her way back to work, smelling of artificial lavender and vanilla. She gave Alfred an unsteady look; he returned an insincere smile.

So, there was no escaping what had to be done. Alfred returned to his cubicle, and three seconds later—swoosh, and foot and pencil fell together again. There was pleasure in the action, to be sure. But not much more could be said about what Alfred felt at that moment beyond that. And then of course, Alfred felt the familiar sensation again, this time, on the sole of his left foot. He removed the shoe, and chop. Pencil and foot to the floor in unison. And then of course, he felt the familiar sensation on his knee caps. Both knees at once. Alfred lifted up his pantlegs, and there was no mistaking it. Warts, both of them, and even bigger than the ones on his feet. Without hesitating, Alfred took care of the problem. In fact, he did better than just that: he cut both legs off entirely, for good measure. Two halves of a broken pencil hit the small trash bin with a dull thud.

And then it was his hands—and here, Alfred almost hesitated—, which was then followed by his arms. Then the torso. The neck. And now Alfred sat, being only a head left of a person. It's hard to say at what rate his cubiclemate snapped his pencils. But whatever the rate, Alfred succeeded it, so that for the first time, Alfred's parts dropped away faster than the pencil fragments. First it was the tongue—a very unpleasant experience. Then Alfred lost nose and smell. One might think the ears would be next to go, but then one would be mistaken. Then Alfred lost eyes and vision. He heard a final crack of a pencil as ears and all sound finally dropped away too.

Alfred suffered a strange curse, indeed,—or was it a blessing?—for a more ordinary curse would at this point have left him in peace. Not much else

remained. At some point, the question of relief and pleasure had become quite irrelevant. The subject of sensation had become moot too, but nonetheless Alfred was not willing to take any chances. A decisive snap of a pencil, and Alfred finally chopped off his whole head too. Honestly, there was no real need for verification at this point anyway. This might sound more absurd than it really was, but it wasn't as though he might have saved it—his head had itself become nothing but a wart. And now finally Alfred experienced true relief. Not of the sort that the woman down the hall knew, nor that of his cubiclemate, nor even that of his boss. It was not the visceral sort of relief he might have expected either, but a kind of stable, almost intellectual one. For now, at last, Alfred had rid himself of his wart, and he knew it.

For some time, he enjoyed the fruits of his labors in a kind of stupor. Once the pleasure turned to modest contentment, Alfred got back up. He returned to the breakroom to finish the conversation he had begun with his boss. But once again, Alfred was distracted. This time, he was not absorbed by himself, but rather by the paper swans littering the ground. His boss let go of one, and it levitated in the air for a couple seconds, carelessly, before perching gracefully on the cheap tiled floor. Alfred watched it. Who knows how many times Alfred had seen the swans; but for the first time, he was genuinely awed by just how beautiful they were.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Andrew Dennis Bassford is a philosopher who works out of the University of Texas at Austin and Austin Community College. He primarily publishes essays in contemporary analytic metaphysics, logic, and philosophy of religion, but on occasion he also pens a short story. "The Wart" is a story he conceived many years back, while reflecting on the meaning of life. He takes his inspiration from literary writers like Jorge Luis Borges, Albert Camus, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Franz Kafka, and Ursula Le Guin. Like each of these writers, Bassford tries to explore philosophical themes through his fiction and is not afraid to bend the rules of reality in order to do so.*

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