

CARVER EST IN OCULIS MEIS: COINCIDENCE IS THE RECREATIONAL FACE OF IRONY

By Nick North

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor JONAH HOWELL writes:*

Tina V. Cabrera wrote of Nick North's story "WORLD AT LARGE" (in FOTD Issue 5) that the story's "tiny sculptures become a microcosm of the larger world that they inhabit." In "COINCIDENCE IS THE RECREATIONAL FACE OF IRONY," North flips this relationship on its head: Each character is one bubble in protagonist Marjorie Nelson's multiverse, and these fragile bubbles can pop at any time, leaving Marjorie to flounder across a turbulent literary archipelago of lives. Trapped, seemingly, in her kitchen, the words that surround her are her only constants: Physical laws break, reconstitute, and shatter again; Brandon, her son, becomes a ghost, becomes a town; her very name seems branded onto her, a mark of vulnerability to North's authorial whims.

But then, North allows his protagonist no stable ground even with regard to himself. If, as he claims, "fiction is not only truth but reality, if only in fiction," then he is her God. And so when North casts doubt on his own authority, asking, "what the deuce does God know?", we are stuck stranded with the hapless Marjorie in a trickster world where we can depend upon nothing. Though North gives a clear nod to his literary influence—"CARVER EST IN OCULIS MEIS"—we cannot trust him entirely. He is Loki, is Proteus, a shape-shifter whose dartings in and out of fiction and metafiction betray an authorial force, a world-bending and world-spawning power, irreducible to any one influence or genre.

One golden passage of many, and perhaps a key to North's mischievous cryptogram: "A young woman named Marjorie Nelson, a woman trying to maintain her sanity in an arguably crazy world comes into the kitchen, goes to the sink and turns on the tap. But life is not a piece of cake."

Five stars.

*CARVER EST IN OCULIS MEIS: COINCIDENCE IS THE RECREATIONAL FACE OF
IRONY*

1.

IT USUALLY STARTS QUITE SIMPLY WITH NO SIGN OF WHAT'S TO COME

Marjorie Nelson stepped into her kitchen, went to the sink and ran the cold water. She looked down and when she looked into the sink she screamed.

“What are these fish doing in here?”

Her son, six year old Brandon, hurried downstairs. He came into the kitchen where his mother stood at the sink. He'd been doing something with water because his hands were wet.

He told her the goldfish bowl broke. It slipped out of his grasp when he was cleaning it in the bathroom upstairs. He'd rescued the fish, one in each cupped palm, with enough water to get them down to the kitchen. He'd been upstairs, in the upstairs bathroom when she'd called, cleaning up the mess. The bowl had slipped out of his grasp and made a noise when it broke but she hadn't heard anything. She hadn't come into the kitchen at that point and she hadn't gone to the sink.

“Well,” she said, “they can't stay here.”

“They don't have a house, Mum.”

“No, they don't Brandon, but they can't stay here.”

The boy started to cry. The next thing she knew he was crying. Marjorie had a cake in the oven. In the oven drawer where she kept the cake tins there was also a roasting pan.

“Would the turkey pan do?”

The boy stopped crying. “What?”

“What about the roasting pan?”

This was a good idea but when he thought about it, he said, “They won’t be able to see out. It’s metal.”

“No, they won’t but this is only for tonight. Tomorrow Daddy will buy you a new goldfish bowl.”

Now the boy smiled. “Okay,” he said. “Thanks, Mum.”

They could both smell the cake. Though the oven door was closed the scent wafted up through the stove burners. She kept the roasting pan that she cooked turkey and sometimes a big ham in with the cake tins in the drawer below the oven. It was the pan she was after—dark navy blue, enameled, with white speckles, a graniteware look.

“This is only for tonight,” she said. She set the pan on the counter and reached for the spaghetti strainer. She handed it to her son.

“It’s lucky I saw them,” Marjorie told him. “What if I’d come in and turned on the hot water? They’d all have boiled. Then what would you think?”

In the bathroom upstairs she often looked in the mirror. This was before there was broken glass in the sink (and a year's newspapers in the bathtub), before the time of the goldfish bowl. She looked into the mirror and sometimes, depending on what day it was, depending on what *time* of day it was, she thought her eyes were green, not the blue eyes she was born with and the dark pupils weren't round but slits that ran sideways like a snake's.

2.

THE SAME OBJECT TAKES ON A DIFFERENT MEANING AND WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE HAS NO RELEVANCE NOW

A distraught woman by the name of Marjorie Nelson stepped into her kitchen, went to the sink and turned on the cold water. She happened to look down and when she looked down she screamed (this was after maybe a couple minutes). The knife, the paring knife that worked so well on the summer peaches and this year's potatoes, was already in by an inch, a full inch, likely an inch and a half. It had punctured the fine mess of wiring, muscle and membrane on the inside of her wrist. She didn't feel the pain as sharply while her wrist was submerged. Marjorie had read somewhere or heard—maybe on TV, maybe from somebody whose face she couldn't place or voice she couldn't remember. 'Look, if you're going to kill yourself do it in the kitchen and run the tap. Slit your wrists in a sink of cold water. You won't feel a thing.' She did feel some pain though, so this was only partly true. Also, you could do it in a bathtub with the same result. (Remove the newspapers.)

She could talk about the way things should go, that life is what you make it and that there really is a God looking down on us—on *you*, Marjorie—and he cares. Despite the cynics, he *cares*.

“He cares,” Marjorie said out loud (even though she was alone). “He cares *deeply*.”

The knife understood deeply, too. The deeper it went the more of Marjorie it took. What kind of life is this? If I was smart I would have got married. I always wanted a husband and a family. I wanted a son and a daughter but mostly, well, I know, I know, I admit it, mostly I wanted a son. If I had a son I’d call him Brandon. I think that’s a good name for a boy. Most people who live alone, die alone.

After she looked down at the sink she screamed. There were no fish. There was no boy upstairs in the bathroom. But there was broken glass in the sink that didn’t cut as well as the knife. She looked down and saw the blood mixed with the water. It looked the same way, but different, like melted chocolate being mixed with white cake batter. When a woman like Marjorie manages to find a man, marries him and has a son named Brandon, making cake is one of the things she does. She puts sugar and eggs and flour into a bowl and stirs it and when she’s ready to add the flavoring she pours in the melted chocolate. It mixes with the batter like blood mixes with water.

3.

BUT IN THE LARGER PICTURE MAYBE IT ISN’T JUST MARJORIE

It was Einstein who said, 'God doesn't play dice.' What he meant to say was that God doesn't play dice on Sundays like good Christians don't play cards or computer games. They attend to their Bibles. It's the day of rest. God rested on the seventh day and you're supposed to, too.

A young woman named Marjorie Nelson, a woman trying to maintain her sanity in an arguably crazy world comes into the kitchen, goes to the sink and turns on the tap. But life is not a piece of cake.

There are reports of water not evaporating. It doesn't matter now if you rinse the crumbs off a plate and set it on the counter, an hour later it's still wet. Towel down after a bath or shower and see what happens. Your skin might be dry but the towel never quite dries. A woman in Brandon claims she washed a spoon two weeks ago, left it to dry by the sink and there is still water on it. The authorities are investigating.

Marjorie does not want the fame. She would prefer not be interviewed by the evening news. When it comes right down to it she would prefer the whole thing went away. But what can she do? What can any of us do?

She leaves the sink and stands in the middle of the room—that would be her kitchen, of course—and addresses us. Before she speaks (and if you've been paying attention and are prepared to believe that fiction is not only truth but reality, if only in fiction) you will note her eyes have changed. She was born with blue eyes but they are green now, the water that washes them every time she blinks does not evaporate, and the pupils are slits that run sideways.

“I, you, none of us knows what to make of it but collectively we suspect it has to do with either ‘snake eyes’ or God resting on the seventh when he really should have put the cards away and finished the job.

But what the deuce does God know?”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *...what interested me was taking a mundane action (a woman going into her kitchen and turning on the tap) and writing it from different points of view, with different outcomes...essentially, Marjorie is repeating the same action at the beginning of each of the three parts of the story...my same ole same ole obsession with ‘the collapse of natural order as an metaphor for our completely fucked up time squat. This is the underlying theme in a lot of my stories. ...it’s something I think about but I don’t think about if you know what I mean...for me Raymond Carver is one the greats of 20th C literature, (American or otherwise) and his style cast a spell upon me. In his famous essay ‘The Architecture of Prose’ he talks about working with words, harmonic keys (most of which are only picked up by the subconscious mind)...he uses repetition in a fundamentally aural manner and this sentence in my story... he’d rescued the fish, one in each cupped palm, with enough water to get them to the kitchen. He’d been upstairs, in the upstairs bathroom, when she called ...is a Carver-ism.*

AUTHOR’S BIO: Nick North recently graduated from art school and plans to live the life of a bohemian. His interests include political activism, nihilism, symbolic logic and chaos. Like Zarathustra, he eschews social media. Oh, and he’s Canadian, eh.

EDITOR’S BIO: Jonah Howell lives in central Germany. You can find his recent work in *Half Mystic Journal* (Issue 8), *Expat Press*, and Issue 5 of *Fleas on the Dog*.) His story **Anatomy of Melancholie** appears in this issue.

