

WE DON'T CELEBRATE THAT

We have just received the new rules, and, of course, they are not that different from the old ones. Now we sit at our machines typing in accordance with the new rules, thinking we fully understand them. I hear someone in the next cube laughing to themselves, but is it their keyboard I hear, or a neighbouring keyboard? How can they be laughing if they've understood the new rules?

As I say, most of them are the same-variations on the theme of Do not make the Prime Minister into a caricature. We all know that by now, and how can you laugh knowing there is someone deciding if a human is a cartoon, but with very little warning or adherence to precedent. In fact, my neighbour, the cackling hero, Paul Binchy, cannot help but recall the odd case of an old friend who became famous. His pseudonym was Jim Zero. He wrote the right stories his whole life, and, as a matter of fact, he was very good. These stories inhabited this very world, they grew out of our own concerns but they were about love, for instance, or the way a man may honour his own memory in his small village. His popularity became too great, and the Prime Minister, read his books, commented on them in public, and even dined with Jim Zero at times. Pretend I don't know that. Jim Zero was never seen in public. It could have been anybody, but I had to disappear at the same time.

Jim Zero did well until someone from the university published a paper in a journal way over in New Zealand explaining how this subtlety must be read. The Prime Minister is absent, he wrote, not because there was nothing to ridicule, but because the rollicking comedy of the novels could not exist in a world which also contained the Prime Minister. Jim Zero is gone, as we know, though it's impossible to know which one of our colleagues used that name. The name is gone.

We are here because we are good at what we do, but the keyboard doesn't measure your laughter. Paul has no need to laugh. None of us believe him. None of us think this is funny. The new section of the rules, section 18, for example. There is only one rule in this section: All stories must say what they are not.

Paul on the bus this morning was all smiles. It's the first day of the new paradigm, he told me, as he sat down beside me.

Yeah, I said. That's great.

It is, he said.

Irony is closely monitored, I told him quietly, leaning toward him.

It's not irony, he told me, and kept up with the smiling. Besides, nobody watches everything. They'd need as many people watching as being watched. That's insane. Let's not be paranoid.

Yeah, I told him. You're right. But a man makes a joke now and then.

Cripes, you're depressing.

Maybe it's the rules.

Fuck the rules, JP. They're no different. They're the same. Actually, we should celebrate how little has

changed. That's the glass half full, right? This is the same day as it was before the new paradigm.

Even calling it that-

You're right. Let's talk about something else.

I stared at my hands, which were folded on my lap, while the polite whirring of the bus lulled me. I was always comforted by machines running as they should. I resisted that, in the old days-of course, I never wrote about it, due to the symbolic repercussions. My colleagues would have ridiculed me. Even under a pseudonym, I avoided describing any character being soothed by the old well-oiled machine, all its parts working in concert, accepting their role in the larger metal and electric scheme.

As I've aged, I appreciate more the body's mechanical aspects; the body is also a machine, though we lack a complete comprehension of it. It is something, this spark of life, etc.

I've been without use of my limbs. I have lived in a weakened body where my intellect limped along the physical edges, wondering at its own mobility, trying to find energy somewhere in its dying machine-

I was distracted by Paul looking over me and out the window. We were stopped in the protest block. We began moving again. I saw signs, bright signs with big black letters: NO WATER DEAL! YANKEES DON'T MAKE THE RULES! and so on. We stopped one more time on the protest block, to let someone off. I watched them put on their approved vest and stand beside another man. This man had no vest. His sign was full of smaller letters: We know what the Americans are doing / they're not coming up behind us they've come / right up FRONT: they see this as some kind of virtue-

As the bus began moving again, we each resumed our straight-ahead gaze.

Lesley has been accepted at the University, Paul said.

Fantastic, I told him. What in?

Engineering, he said, and I understood his mood. There is no ideology in building a bridge. Nobody will ask you to spell out in concrete what is and is not contained in the concrete. This is not a jungle gym, you won't say. This is not a glass box for trinkets. This is not a church, either legal or discouraged.

This is not for airplanes. Everyone knows what a bridge is.

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I'M HAVING THE TIME OF MY LIFE, Paul tells me. I've been working for weeks and produced nothing new. I'm going to make this my life's work. I don't care what it takes. I don't have a system. I think I need an assistant.

That's the sure sign, I tell him. I think you're destined for management.

He's smiling, but he stops. No management, he says. Listen, you know me. I am about to become horribly grand, but it will just be for a moment; you know I think it's all horseshit.

Yeah, I tell him.

I think this is my best work, he whispers.

I know what he means. He means he thinks he is producing art. I'm moved to give him a small hug, which we don't do. But today we do. We never use the word anymore, but we know when we say it.

I wanted to support him. I did. I pictured him listing things, describing them, happy as he'd ever been. He could work on a project that would never end, a book that contained everything, but said it did not.

Part of me got angry. Angry at Joyce, who was so far up the academy as to be harmless and comical.

Who needs another subversive story?

But my own experience, which, to be honest, frightened me, and the thought of Paul happy, working on his masterwork, saved by the fact it would never be read ... why not? He's worked hard his whole life.

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HE WRITES:

This is not a story about the time Paul Binchy was walking from a small restaurant in his youth. Not about the small delay in his life as he met a friend of his father's on the relatively quiet October street. On that day there was no sun above and its light didn't end on the dirty cold asphalt. It's not about the cold from the shade that made him shiver as his father's friend spoke.

It's about-

Paul, I said, we don't have to say what it's about, exactly, if I understand the new rules-

No. You're right, he says. We don't.

But you're telling what it's about.

So? Listen. It's about.

It's about. Don't say what it's about. We still have the illusion, I tell him. The vivid continuous dream and so on.

What?

The suspension of-

No. It's all bullshit now. All bets are off.

But you're actually, I tell him, through this list . . .

Paul isn't listening anymore. He's hurt. Or angry. Angry or hurt; even in the new paradigm, a writer's ego is fragile. I should have known. We used to laugh together, working away in the word mines, thinking of new ways to say the obvious, laughing at all the things our peers were doing. Really? From the cat's point of view? Things like that.

Come on, Paul, I say. Carry on.

No. Never mind.

Well give it to me then. I'll read it.

And I do:

It's about the young man shivering there at the edge of the darkness because of a completely different reason. As the older man spoke about how mild the winter would be, digging his hands into the small pockets of his jacket, a bus pulled up beside them. As if he'd been running beside it the whole time, a man stopped suddenly as the door opened. At the hiss of the doors no one exited. The man stood before the open door, briefly, staring up at the small child riding on his shoulders. She reached down, removed the man's black glasses and leaned toward his naked eyes, saying Daddy, I have to poop. They got on the bus, and it drove away.

The young man was smiling, ignoring the words of his father's friend, his mind on the man stooping through the door of the bus, reaching up to hold his daughter's head safely down, while she worked at getting his glasses back onto his face. He stared at the space the departed bus left on the street. Just where the shade met the sunned upon asphalt, a mouse lay, almost invisible at the dark border.

The old man continued with his story, but the young man wanted to help the mouse, which was dying. He looked in the storyteller's eyes and tried to find a break in the string of words. He tried to find in those eyes, and in the rhythm of the voice, a need for some kind of rest. He waited, but the old man's back was to the mouse, whose black marble eyes, the size of its own little fists, if its hands would curl into fists, were round and open. They were glossy bubbles that showed nothing, but the tiny stomach heaved quickly, and the jaw hung open.

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AND THIS, READING THIS STORY, recalls a memory from my own youth, a memory in which I was absorbed in a novel. A man stood at a podium in this book, he stood and he spoke to a crowd of strangers and began to lose the ability to breathe. He spoke as well as he could because the breath was leaving him. He clutched the sides of the podium. He concentrated and he was scared, but not scared enough to stop speaking.

As the description of the man's heroism or stupidity worked its way down the left page of the open book on my lap I became more and more agitated, because the book went on for at least one hundred more pages. How could this character die? Then, in my peripheral vision I saw the white space with three asterisks halfway down the page on the right.

I read as quickly as I could, knowing that if we got to the white space with the man still alive, he would survive. I was no longer angry at the man for wasting his last breaths on words. They weren't his last breaths;

the white space was right there.

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PAUL AND I USED TO SIT in the Royal Oak and have dreams. We were in the journalism program with all the others, but we wanted to write stories, and we talked all the time about art. We were going to write the truth, etc. We were young.

We were with a group that went down to the United States one spring, for briefings, for press conferences, and so on, as part of the State Department's Voluntary Visitor's Program. We listened to the speeches, the evasions. We read stories the next day. We spent our per diem on beer and cheap cigarettes. Uh huh, we thought, this is why we need art. The only way at the truth anymore, and so on—we talked about some lofty things that we were still young enough to believe. We would use our middle names, for instance, as pen-names. We were the first generation of prairie kids to be named after the dead or dying towns of our parents' youth—he was Paul Glamis. I was James Perdue.

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THE COINCIDENCES ARE AWFUL. I came back to Ottawa just in time to get on a flight and fly out west to see my mother. They'd kept me away for almost a year, then they let me return. By then everyone had forgotten the subversive, made-up, author. I thought they were being human. But the whole thing made a good cover.

Where are your brothers? my mother asked me.

Soon, I said. We all have so much work.

I think your brothers are gone, she said, though she was blind by then. I could have been any one of her sons. I held her hand and told her, no, I've spoken with them recently. Oh, she said, it's okay. Thank you for the love of your children, she whispered. I knew she meant my nieces and nephews. I had no idea where my own children had gone.

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NOBODY WILL KNOW I DID THIS. They might think someone else did it. But I have returned.

If it wasn't winter I couldn't handle it. If it was summer and I had to be out in the sunshine with bare arms, or have the sunshine peeling into me past the edges of curtains, I couldn't bear it. I would need help. It turns every room into the white of a hospital room.

But it is winter, and staying indoors is not unusual. Darkness is not unusual. Skating on the canal is not unusual either, but there's no need to bare any part of your body, and even your face is hidden by a tingle pronounced in the extra pink of your cheeks. My cheeks. And if you see someone you know while you wait in line for a beaver tail you can hide behind some kind of tissue, wiping your nose, when the spirit moves you, when the person you know is surprised to find you and reaches out their hand to touch your sleeve and say I haven't seen you forever.

I was back home, you say, and if pressed say that your mother was sick, which is not a lie.

Then you're back home and see yourself in the mirror, suddenly bumpy at the edges, suddenly spotted with uneven hairs and dry discolourations, suddenly old. How did your body rearrange itself? You can't even feel the tips of your fingers, but you feel the swollen knuckles. Do the people you meet out in the world know all of this?

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I'M THINKING OF A TIME when there will be a final rule. I hope I may be dead by then. If that rule were in place right now, I would be compelled to tell you what this story is about. We will have come full circle-all the rules will have cancelled out. It is about a man doing his duty, I might say. A man struggling with skills he has barely learned and adapting to new rules, not for the sake of his family, which has left him. No, he is alone. It cannot be for the sake of anyone but himself. He fulfills his obligations and he enjoys it, because society benefits. Each step is a celebration of freedom and he's glad.

But those are not the rules today. Today there are different rules and I am not compelled to tell you anything, other than this is not a story about looking into your dying mother's eyes and contemplating the confusion there. It's not about peace either.