

Neither Here Nor There

stories by MARCEL JOLLEY



Black Lawrence Press
New York

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FOREWORD

Marcel Jolley's imaginative scope can be wonderfully clear, and yet mysterious at the same time:

I am, for the most part, unremarkable. I am twenty-six years old, a conservative thirty pounds overweight, and I work as a clerk for a well-known chain store offering copying, printing and binding services. The company prefers "copy artist," but in the interest of honest self-appraisal, I decline the title. I hail from Beaverton, Oregon, a collection of Olive Gardens, Red Robins and Pier One outlet stores interchangeable with countless other parasitic suburbs riding the coattails of better-known cities. Combine this heritage with a 2.7 undergrad GPA and half a master's degree from a state university and my milquetoast normalcy solidifies. I have something, though, that sets me apart from most people, an ace up my sleeve. I have an archenemy.

What impresses me most here is the author's ability to create a very distinct parable form in the grey formless world of American suburbia. The voice is clear, but the tone has distinct strangeness to it. There is humor, but also a bit of darkness in its foretaste. There is obvious self-irony, and yet also a touch of unexpected pride. Jolley gives us very routine American characters and conversations while still charging them with a sense of the unknown.

And here are also a few voices we may already know:

“Yo!”

“Yo, Jade,” I say. “It’s Casey.”

“Hi, Casey. This isn’t Jade.”

“Okay.”

“Wanna take a guess?”

“Not particularly.”

“You are no fun,” she says, and I can’t argue.

And—

“Say hi to Mike for us,” Dad says.

“Is he still with that girl?” Mom says.

“Yes, he is.”

“I was never really sure about her.”

“I’ll pass that along,” I say. “Love you guys.”

“We love you, son.”

We know these sorts of conversations. We have them ourselves. These familiar everyday voices fill Jolley’s stories because they allow him to make the darker mysteries of the human psyche seem comfortable to us, if only for a moment. He gives us pictures of dumb, boring, blank days spent in copy stores or at bars with former college buddies. And yet, on the same page, he also shows that the most mundane, brainless activity can be wonderfully interesting and spiritually satisfying if it is observed with enough human interest, empathy and attentiveness.

Jolley may be observing the ordinary surfaces, but his concern always lies with the core. He is interested in the mysteries of identity which both reveal and betray our very inner desires:

“My archenemy senses me coming and looks up. His eyes betray the smallest amount of concern. He knows this is not my stop. He knows something is happening. He knows who I am.”

Luckily, Jolley’s search for identity is filled with narrative pleasures and urgent plots. There are characters who “drank a few beers, but they might as well have been a church group. Everything was ‘yes, ma’am,’ or ‘no, sir.’ They kept completely to themselves. They’d done things, you could tell.” We meet a neighbor who tells high tales of murder and intrigue, and we meet unrequited

But most of all, we find in this collection the music and promise of the narrative that is simply captivating:

As a result, I threw my twenty-five year old life into my twelve-year old car and descended from the Mile High City. The car always knew where to go before, so I trusted it again. It deposited me in Bozeman, Montana, home of my alma mater and several friends who long ago eschewed degrees for season passes at Bridger Bowl. I was there with no definite plans to leave when my parents called last weekend with news of my friend's death.

And so the journey begins. Fasten your seat-belts, dear readers, for *Neither Here Nor There* is the best sort of adventure in fiction—it finds a way to make the most unassuming things strange and wondrous by the means of its attentive and muscular prose.

Ilya Kaminsky
San Francisco



For Cathy

...and I remembered something you once told me,
And I'll be damned if it did not come true,
Twenty thousand roads I went down, down, down,
And they all led me straight back home to you.

Return of the Grievous Angel



NEITHER HERE NOR THERE

Everyone in town claimed to know someone who drowned in the channel. Maybe it was just rural folklore, or perhaps with a year-round population of five hundred, everyone had simply known the same drowned person. Despite these warnings, local kids still spent summer days out there watching the tides whip in and out in flurries of white water. At night teenagers drove there to drink, fumble their way toward sexual prowess, and take the hairpin turn at the channel's edge as fast as their old cars and young nerves allowed.

The tide's movement through the channel was violent and fascinating. Local fishermen blamed ghosts from sunken boats, a few Tlingit old timers spoke of angry spirits, and smart college kids up for the summer used terms like "venturi" and "Bernoulli's principle." Whatever the reason, watching the channel's stagnant pockets and seaweed-covered rocks fill and empty with a river-like rush had the feeling of something meant to be. You knew it would keep happening whether or not anyone was there to watch.

The four boys arrived after noon, fresh from baseball practice, and dropped their bikes beside the dirt road. The one named Danny led the others over the rocks and down into the tide pools. He wasn't so much big for his thirteen years as he was substantial. A large ribcage gave him a head start and the Tlingit blood from his mom's side added an angular strength. Already he

sprouted natural patches of muscle that the other three would later spend fruitless afternoons on the high school's worn Universal set hoping to replicate. Behind him walked Casey, taller than Danny but lanky. His awkward movement suggested an extended break-in period lay between that afternoon and the time when he would feel comfortable in his own skin. The other two boys, Mike and Dustin, followed closely. Both were interchangeable with each other, if not a million boys worldwide. They were good boys who would grow into good men, reliable and predictable. They would always buy the table a round at their turn and would return borrowed tools in good condition and a timely manner. They all followed and Danny led with the same reluctant ease with which he would lead them to a 2A Division basketball championship four years later.

The tide was out and the channel empty save for a few bigger pools. The rocks were as dry as they would ever get, but still slick underfoot. Seaweed and mussels hung everywhere in dirty clumps, waiting for the water's return. It would come soon. The boys knew this, in the way most kids from Southeast Alaska possessed some innate sense for water. They played among the tidal pools, searching for any sea life trapped there by the previous tide's rapid departure. They found only the standards—diminutive starfish, kelp and jellyfish parts.

"Jim Tully claims he found a sea otter out here last month," Dustin said.

Mike agreed. "I heard he was gonna keep it, but it got free on the way home."

"He also said he got his hand down Sandy Nelson's panties," Casey said. "And she gave him a shot to the nads for it."

They all paused, waiting for Danny to chime in. He stood watching the first trickles creep into the channel's far end. He cocked an eye and gave them what they wanted.

"Tully's full of shit, that's for sure."

And that was that about Jim Tully, his sea otter and Sandy Nelson's panties.

The channel would fill soon. Danny led the others back up over the slippery rocks onto the dirt road. Each boy grabbed a length of leftover kelp on the way and a spontaneous battle erupted. They whipped each other to welts until the kelp strands cracked and popped apart in their hands. They laughed and performed damage inspections of each other. The water

rivulets swelled down onto the rocks at the channel's far end, growing thicker.

The boys perked up their ears, listening for cars roaring down the dirt road for a sliding ninety-degree turn at the channel's edge. They scanned the waters outside the passage, searching for local boats. They spoke of the money older brothers and cousins earned and how they themselves would be out there at their first chance, maybe just another couple summers. Danny talked of the late 60's muscle car—maybe a GTO, maybe a Mustang—that his fishing money would bring to town. Danny didn't say it but the others knew his first order of business would be the channel road. They would all be riding along, taking the corner faster than any of them wanted, scared to death. Knowing this made them enjoy that quiet, dry summer day a little more.

They were just leaving when Casey heard the cat. He started talking louder in hopes no one would notice the mewling and they would soon be on their bikes headed home. But Danny heard, just like Casey knew he would.

Dustin spotted the cat first, across the channel from them. It must have crossed earlier at low tide and now started down below the waterline to return. The cat wore a collar and telltale bell, but Casey didn't recognize it as one of the town's familiar pets, such as old man Field's one-eyed tabby or the Jenkins' three-legged Hopalong.

Mike threw the first rock, sharing with Dustin the nervous chuckles of conspirators with no definite plan. The rock landed well right of target, a dull ricochet off a thick patch of seaweed. The cat's tail ballooned and the animal crouched lower, awaiting the rocks that both the cat and the boys knew were coming. Dustin and Mike plucked and threw rocks quickly, their efforts proving why they were relegated to first and second base. The rocks came nowhere near the cat, but rather sent the animal on a sporadic course around the seaweed and tide pools. Realizing their limitations, the two soon decided it wiser to use their poor aim to keep the cat in the channel until it filled with water. Knowing the others were eyeing him, Casey picked up an oblong rock and threw it lazily. He hoped to land a few strategic shots forcing the cat to the other shore, but he was a catcher and had the worst arm of the four.

A thick preliminary stream coursed down the channel, drawing from the healthier pools. The cat leapt over the stream

only to land in a large puddle. It sprung out, soaking wet and suddenly skinny, and headed for the opposite shore.

“Shit, it’s getting away,” Mike said. They redoubled their effort with renewed vigor and failing accuracy.

Danny took two steps to his left and picked up a rock, rolling it from hand to hand. The other boys stopped their throwing and watched. Whatever would happen was now going to happen. Whether or not they wanted it, whether or not Danny wanted it. Even the cat, still picking its way over the wet rocks, appeared to sense the futility and slow its flight.

Danny rolled the rock into his throwing hand and cast a quick glance to Casey, his catcher. As with his glances from the mound, Danny looked less for agreement than forgiveness, an okay from a friend to go ahead and use his natural gift. At the ball diamond that look apologized to the sub par player who stood between them at the plate, whose parents sat in the stands watching Danny strike out their son. Today his glance apologized to whoever owned that cat, the people who would spend the next few nights searching the woods outside town and hanging handmade missing posters on telephone poles and the post office bulletin board.

Casey gave only his usual non-committal nod of a friend. He knew Danny would throw the rock and hit the cat. The stone would kill or at least stun the animal until the water filled the channel, like it had yesterday and like it would tomorrow, and that would be that. All this would happen regardless of whether ghosts, angry spirits or just basic science was to blame.



I read somewhere once how two in the morning is the midnight of the soul. Crossing the Columbia River near George, Washington at 2:17 a.m., I understand the sentiment. I’ve traversed a time zone since leaving Bozeman this afternoon and worry I’ve somehow forced my soul to linger even longer in this shifting midnight. After a day of turbo-flavored chips and 32-ounce sodas, my soul is probably used to the abuse.

Souls aside, these are desperate traveling hours. I see only the headlights and taillights of people rushing to get to their destinations before their trip and its dubious motives are exposed to daylight’s unforgiving scrutiny. What would an inspection of these cars reveal? Absconded children or goods, bail money, or

maybe just fingers crossed in hopes of finding the car in a new and better place when it finally stops. A green Ford Escort hums by on bald tires. Inside sits a lone skeletal blonde with a death grip on the wheel. She stares straight forward as if she just caught first sight of Seattle's lights, still two hours and a mountain range away. The Escort's right side is severely dented and damaged. When this woman wants to go right, she goes right. I slow to give her a wide berth.

My own motive for late night travel is the archenemy of desperation—complete freedom, or darn near it. My only appointments are with Alaska Airlines for a flight north to Juneau in two days, and after that with an old friend, now dead and waiting for me and several others to put him in the moist Southeast Alaska ground. A grisly appointment indeed, and one I would avoid had I anything—a job or prospect thereof, a girlfriend, or even oral surgery—to cite as an excuse. I have nothing. I lay claim to only a 1980 Datsun B210 and a life that fits in the back with room to spare.

Until last month I worked as an engineering analyst for a well-known defense contractor. Among the red rocks of the Rocky Mountain foothills outside Denver I fine-tuned minor systems on missiles. Like most who worked there, I convinced myself my work and research was not of the nature that directly blew people up. Someone there apparently did do work of that nature, because just over a year ago the products of my company and our competitors put on quite a show on CNN and created a one-month war. The missiles proved so efficient that many minor players like myself received our walking papers. The young lady I was seeing at the time didn't want to ruin my streak and also sent me packing, ending our seven-month run over bottomless steak fries at a Red Robin off I-70.

As a result, I threw my twenty-five-year old life into my twelve-year-old car and descended from the Mile High City. The car always knew where to go before, so I trusted it again. It deposited me in Bozeman, Montana, home of my alma mater and several friends who long ago eschewed degrees for season passes at Bridger Bowl. I was there with no definite plans to leave when my parents called last weekend with news of my friend's death.

Three o'clock finds me standing outside a gas station mini-mart in Ellensburg, bathed in the glow of a sign claiming twenty-four hour service. Everything indicates life. Neon lights emit an artificial hum, all things microwaveable wait in a plastic

case to be unwrapped and devoured, and the hot dogs and sausage links inside roll toward me on their metal treadmill but grow no closer. The doors, however, are locked in a blatant disregard for company policy. The clerk is no doubt engaged with a joint, a girlfriend or a magazine, but my near empty gas tank demands I await his return.

I walk to a nearby payphone, pull a (206) number from my pocket and dial it. Thoughts that those awaiting my arrival—a life-long friend and his Bellevue girlfriend—are sitting at home quietly concerned as to my whereabouts are dispelled when the receiver is lifted. The background of music and laughing rises first, then a voice jumping in like a wet t-shirt contestant.

“Yo!”

“Yo, Jade,” I say. “It’s Casey.”

“Hi, Casey. This isn’t Jade.”

“Okay.”

“Wanna take a guess?”

“Not particularly.”

“You’re no fun,” she says, and I can’t argue. First comes a thump, and I worry my fun deficiency has gotten me hung up on. Then I hear a chuckle and a grasp.

“Where the hell are you, Casey?”

“Hi, Jade,” I say. “I’m getting gas just outside Ellensburg.”

“All right.” Her tone wavers. She is one of thousands of Puget Sound girls who attended the U of W or Western in Bellingham and returned to Seattle via some homing instinct. To her kind, anywhere east of Snoqualmie Falls is like side two of the Nirvana album she bought for the first song. She knows it’s out there, but by that point she’s not listening anymore.

“About an hour and a half,” I say.

“But the party will be over by then.”

“Can I come anyway?”

“Of course, sweetie. You can sleep in and we’ll take you around town tomorrow. I bet you want to talk to Mike.”

“If he’s available.”

“Anything for you.” I hear a hand palm the receiver for a moment.

Then: “Hey, bud.”

“Sounds like I’m missing all the fun,” I say.

“I suppose.” I visualize Mike dragging a disappointed look over the remnants of a good time crowding his apartment. “A couple of Jade’s friends came over. Trent and Kelsey, I don’t

think you know them. They just got back from hiking around Thailand and we've been looking at their pictures and tying one on. So you'll be here in a couple of hours, huh?"

"Bout that, I guess."

"Cool," he says. "So when is your flight on Wednesday?"

I decode his message. "So you're not going?"

Mike exhales and launches a practiced defense. "I can't, Case. We've got a big project going up in Mountlake Terrace and I really need to stick around. Jade's dad is having me head up the whole thing."

I toe the dirt beneath the phone. "I got you, pal. That's okay."

"Yeah, so anyway." Mike clearly welcomes the passage of this exchange and moves on quickly. "Hey, check this out. I talked to Dustin the other day. He said Brad Mullen had his boat outside the channel that morning and saw a pod of killer whales out there."

"Huh." I spin on a noise behind me. The lost clerk has resurfaced. The pudgy and badly-complected young man unlocks the doors with an embarrassed smile hinting his reasons for being AWOL are less than admirable. With surprisingly succinct hand and eye gestures, we wordlessly agree I need pump number one on and I am to pay inside.

I retake the phone. "Kinda early in the season for them, huh?"

"Exactly," Mike says. "I remembered that legend we studied in Mr. Scott's Alaskan history class, the one about how a killer whale showing up means the spirits are coming to take someone away."

"Yeah," I say. "But, I think that was a Chugach legend. Danny was Tlingit, and only half at that."

"Oh yeah." A sad chuckle follows. "Maybe the whale couldn't tell the difference. No. No, that's bad. I shouldn't have said that."

"Ah, don't worry about it." I hadn't noticed. I am only thinking how proud the now-retired Mr. Scott would be of our last exchange.

"Yeah, Case, I feel like shit about not going to the funeral, but there'll be plenty of people there." Mike pauses. "You know Kristen's going, don't you?"

I hear the pump kick on and light up. I shiver and tell myself it's a result of the cold.

“No kidding? When did you hear from her?”

“She lives here, dude, in Seattle,” Mike says. “I ran into her a few weeks ago at Southcenter. She moved up from San Francisco and is living with her aunt here. She called the other day to see if we were going, and I told her you would be there. I think she’s even on the same flight to Juneau as you. Her and the German guy, y’know...”

“I heard.”

“So, yeah, she got custody of the little boy. He was with her, real cute. Her hair’s a little longer, little more brown, I guess.”

Mike has found his trump card for bowing out of the trip and earned his release.

“Well, Mike, I better hit the road.”

“Okay, buddy, we’ll leave a key in the planter.”

“See you soon.”

I hang up and suck in a noseful of chilled air ripe with the aroma of a hundred cows awaiting a dubious future back off I-90. It stinks and sends pinprick aches down into my lungs, but it’s all right. I am energized. Mike gave me what he knew I wanted—an actual sighting with seemingly insignificant but telling details and hints of inevitable future contact. I pump gas and think of questions I never could have asked Mike. How much longer was her hair? How far had it strayed from the stylish bi-level I’d always wanted to run my hand through? How did she react when he mentioned I would be at the funeral? Was her German clothing magnate trying to win her back, in whatever way a clothing magnate did that?

Riding close behind these musings is a comfortable futility, one that in the end kept me sane during my school years alongside Kristen. I dislike the term “crush” and never found a suitable synonym, though I guess in a certain way I could have been labeled a “Kristen enthusiast.” I was akin to a sedentary sports fan, cheering my team on over beers and hot wings, stretching logo-laden apparel to its extreme with my undisciplined bulk. Any chance of getting in the game myself was doubtful, and if given the opportunity, an embarrassing defeat seemed imminent. Such was my hopelessness that even close friends couldn’t bring themselves to tease me. Instead they broached the subject like a hobby I persisted in despite no promise of a pay-off. Like stamp collecting, maybe, or oboe lessons.

Despite the sincere sweetness Kristen had always exhibited toward everyone, her romantic future always seemed to

lie on a horizon beyond the mountains of Southeast. Save for a few elementary school steadies, Kristen never dated anyone from town. She opted instead to see college guys during the summers and had to finally venture overseas to Der Faderland for a suitable spouse. Despite that union's demise, it still doesn't give much hope to someone she has known since grade school who now probably feels to her as comfortably familiar as a parent's old coat.

Still, as I merge back on to I-90 with my fellow desperate travelers, I think how I wouldn't have expected Danny to be dead barely eight years after our championship game. Time passes and things can change. I feel momentarily guilty for the morbid hope I gain from this, but in a car with a failing heater, I can use it for warmth.



Danny always put scars into two categories. They were a by-product of either bravery or stupidity, though both often sprung from the same well. Whenever he assessed his own collection, from the crooked line under his elbow to the nickel of tissue on his left knee, he figured he just about broke even.

None of his past wounds, though, boasted the texture of the one sliding under his fingertip. Rough but rhythmic, it read like a Braille curse word. Marlene, the scar's owner, shifted under his touch and didn't even lift her head from the pillow.

"Knock it off."

She sweetened this with a smile, understanding his need to touch. Though Danny didn't bear the scar nor did he want to, he felt it his right. Responsibility granted a certain ownership.

"What's it been, two years?" he said. "You healed up real good."

No response. Marlene was asleep again.

They had been drinking heavy that night out at the channel, like a hundred times before and a hundred since. Driving back Marlene was hanging out the passenger side of his Chevelle, her full weight pressing her hips down against the half-open window. The others followed in Jim Tully's truck, and Marlene was flipping them the bird or flashing her goods or something like that. Sometimes Danny could convince himself he never noticed the pothole in his headlights. Other times he knew he saw it coming. The door window shattered, cutting right through her 501's. The glass sliced a five-dollar bill in her pocket clean in half