

# Second Attempt

March 2022

So here we are again. That difficult second album. After all, how is one to surpass a previous best - short form fiction that elicits such laudatory sentiments as “certainly a lot of words”, and the ever incisive “subpar”. Well not like this, that’s for fucking sure. Here I am again, struggling away in the dark. Sifting through fragments of memory, scattered shards of pottery atop shifting sand. If I scabble through long enough, the join of two pieces just *so* might suggest that there is yet a whole to be recovered. We shall see! This is going to be real jazz writing., I’ll be doing the words, and groovy Jon Thompson is going to hit us with his metronome beat of *themes...* Just imagine someone clicking their fingers once per paragraph. The most important job however falls to you, the reader. It is absolutely imperative that you wear sunglasses indoors, smoke cigarettes and look cool enough for both of us.

The first problem is structure, so allow me to furnish us with scaffolding. This is my second Mardi Gras doing this, and the lived experience of it was much the same. What’s changed is how I feel about. The day is still a swirling mess of colour and fag smoke and the first ethanol hit of undermixed iced coffee. The same emotions are animating it all, but this time it’s not the fun I remember. It’s the struggle. It is being caught under high noon, and forced to tramp that sizzling asphalt. It is the final effort to stay coherent and coordinated long enough to get that last drink down you. It is, most of all, about absence. This expresses itself differently in all of us, and how we deal with it reflects us. Minor catastrophes of life, echoing back at just the moment some of those load bearing walls are starting to crumble. Life’s beating us up! Here we are in this ceaseless negotiation with the rest of reality just to carve out the space to *exist*. And above it all, a cloudless shadow that darkens the day.

A good friend recently had their own descent down this particular dark staircase. At first it’s a sympathy story for that supposedly senior colleague who’s *not doing well*. The seed is planted, to be watered by two days of booze. It blooms into the selfsame realisation that they are themselves not at their best. There is something heartbreaking about the only solution to sleep depriving anxiety being nervous exhaustion. The details change, not the outcome. The struggle is - as they say - real. So let’s rip the plaster off. Maybe that career isn’t quite going to plan. Maybe some of those issues got worse instead of better. Maybe you shouldn’t have eaten all that freezer lasagne... An uncomfortable degree of present reality intruded into that last one, but don’t let it distract you

from my essential point. Individually, and collectively we've hit bedrock. This really *must* be the bottom of the pit. So Jesus grab a shovel, we're going to dig our way out.

How do we cope? the first option is drugs because when all you've got is a chemical hammer, your problems start to look like nails. The issue that I've been marinating in two tabs and a full half pound of edibles, and yet am *still* here, still doing this. So clearly these things are not working as doctor prescribed. An example would be instructive - our dog has this habit where she continuously licks her paw. There's nothing wrong with the paw, *other than the fact she keeps licking it*. She knows it's not helping, she knows it's just making it red and sore, and yet she *persists*. That's me and drugs. You can hear it in the questions of the others, but you make the supremely confident pronouncement that everything is nicely in hand. No no, it's only your brother who hopelessly deluded himself about his ability to keep a spiraling habit in check. Suddenly the line on that pottery shard looks like a cliff edge. What's worse, you're drawing a truly dreadful visual metaphor. Maintain all the pretense you like, but it's starting to look remarkably like a junkie with a grant proposal...

It gets worse, because this wild flailing isn't just hurting yourself. I once had a friend from the UK visit, for which my wife prepared a full itinerary. I had acid though, and once I mentioned it that's what he wanted to do. In the end we split the difference and decided to tour the city while high on life. And a few hundred micrograms of LSD. There is something unrelentingly grim about a day that *starts* with you losing your mind in an un-air conditioned streetcar, packed cheek to jowl with the other riders. In June. That evening ended with me cradling him on the floor of the kitchen, having him wail that "there's no eject button", all while spotify decided what we really needed to hear was bridge over troubled water. Evidently, *evidently* drugs and their attendant manias are not an answer. The world *doesn't* need your shamanic insight that the moon is important, you just have to live with disappointment of having done all that mental traveling just to arrive at the spot most people *start* at. Yes the moon is important, but the fridge is icing up again and you need to go to work.

The problem is you. Our second option then is to turn inwards, to improve the world by improving the self. Another friend, far more comfortable with reality and their place in it, had some advice. They told me to just *try* to be more free. That's going to be a hard no - if you extracted all that shame out of me, there'd be nothing left. Only a fragile superstructure of ego unburdened by the totally warranted fear of society at large. Some of us just *like* being repressed, and in any case we've all seen too many ugly cases of people *being themselves* to not want to resist it. Living performs a peculiar sort of lithography on the soul, and I'm afraid that baring mine will only serve to reveal the petty bitterness etched across it. When I turn inward, all I see are ideas that make the world worse. A dating app for scientists that gets them doing their metadata *for* you, a crisis help line staffed by ChatGPT, Elon Musk buying twitter. See, there he goes again, the world's second richest man inserting himself where he's not wanted. If you want to depress yourself go check out what Larry Ellison did with his money. He casually fucked off to his own Hawaiian island, presumably

to recreate a Tiberean Capua. What does it say when almost everyone with the resources to sequester themselves from the rest of humanity chooses to do so? Perhaps that's the solution, to be so relentlessly acquisitive that your problems become everyone else's. But what hope is there for those of us *not* lucky enough to have hung out with Jeffrey Epstein? Are we meant to just vicariously wallow in the socials of those that did? I really don't think I'm equipped for that. After all, we evolved just enough emotional fortitude to not kill Grag for having more reindeer antlers, what fucking hope do we have against the orbital cannon of lifestyle propaganda? No, self improvement is like post-seventies German energy policy, insofar as it will not prevent a war in Eurasia, no matter how hard you try.

This is when we reach for the third option, during that long Newsnight interview of the soul. The final recourse, reserved for the moment when the sun is beating down over a sea of endless peril, and our last reserves of strength are spent. The only arrow in the quiver is hope. Hope that it might all just eventually sort itself out, and that it really will get better if we don't pick at it. When you beseech the universe to just give you a fucking hand, and it comes back with a hat. A hat in the middle of an empty fucking street. It is *exactly* what you need. The solution is *right there*, all you have to do is pick it up. Do you really have a right to complain if you *don't pick up the hat*?

Now, I know what you are thinking. This all sounds suspiciously like I stole a child's hat and then had to Göebbels the event by writing my side first. But you would be wrong, the hat offers a salutary lesson beyond making sure its owner is written out of history. Namely that it was bloody boiling out and I should have packed a secondary wizard hat to begin with. But also that if you wait long enough the variance of chance will put *something* in the plus column. I will admit, hoping it all sorts itself out is an imperfect strategy, especially in a universe that hands you awkward facts. As a totally random example that is definitely not still keeping me up at night, I once agreed to do a podcast where I was presented as some sort of expert on smell. The teeth grinding cringe of that haunts me, when every second sentence was some desperate attempt to make "I don't know" sound erudite. Hoping the next thing I said might magically make the preceding bollocks coherent. That was an occasion where hitting and hoping did *not* work out. It's hardly an isolated scenario. Some things - like brain surgery - go a lot smoother with a plan, and the merest shred of competence.

But look, both of those things require work. You know what doesn't? Hoping for the best. You hit the street, hoping to find fortune with the day. And of course you're going to find it, today of all days. It will be full of small moments not readily forgotten. It will have your wife extending her flawless track record with a costume she Macgyvered up while hungover the day before. You will find yourself dancing behind Chinese weather girls, and being pleasantly surprised that you haven't had a stranger stab themselves in front of you this year. There will be a family dressed collectively as the very hungry caterpillar, showing a dedication to literature that these strangers' kids aren't yet old enough to fully appreciate, but they *will* be. There will be a riverbank, and a moment of peace

and calm.

The very first question I was asked today - am I an optimist? I am trying my hardest not to be. The universe at large is queuing up with things to kick us with. Parents die, relationships fail and all that half digested lasagne wants an encore. But look, what does it say if we can have that as the background music but *still* find a way to go out and dance to it? This might be looping into another of those drug fueled inanities, observing that nice things are nice. Nevertheless, keep smiling when you're struggling, and eventually you might find a hat.

I walked the dog when we got home, and got two pieces of perspective. The first came from an ancient witness to the city. Caught in the evening breeze, she spoke at some length about a friend long dead. What mattered apparently was all the happy memories they'd been left with. Recollection of the struggle faded, but not the person it produced. The counterpoint was provided by a group of students sitting outside the brewery. They were playing a game that asked them to name the worst among them, like red guards hunting counter revolutionaries. There is I think a clear choice to be made.

And that's it! I did not once find a way to use the word disenaugered. I failed to call Henry Kissinger a war criminal, or remark on the age defying effects of a thorough course of realpolitik evil. I still do not know how to stop a runaway sentence, or rogue *italics*. I feel slightly less cool than last year, and have *again* learned nothing.