

"Mr. Howl has written his most deeply felt novel yet--a novel that turns out to be both a compelling biography of a dysfunctional family and an indelible portrait of our times."

The New York Times

Doomed Illusionist |

BY VERNON HOWL

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I have no idea how I got like this. Some point beyond depression. Just effortlessly, blankly sad. Or not sad... No.

The other day, at a tulip farm, picking goddam tulips with the family. The boy, not into it at all. One bawling tantrum down. But why should a boy care about pretty flowers? He's only "sensitive" when we want to remark about how

sensitive he actually is. He'd rather stomp these things, or pretend they're guns.

The girl, into it. But almost performatively so? There for the photo-op, already. No sense of nature, just how good she might look amongst it. Bleak shit, man.

A young skinny guy with a hot girlfriend said, "nice shirt, man" to me. I was wearing a faded black KISS tee that has these weird bleach stains that

make it look almost tie-dyed. I don't know how it got like that but it makes it look probably 75% cooler. It's the *Destroyer* album cover, if you're burdened with the knowledge of such things.

His girl was almost impossibly hot, maybe a "butter-face," but just unreal body dimensions, and I wished I had worn a more mirrored pair of sunglasses so I could stare at her more discreetly// intensely. I mean, it didn't

really stop me. It's hard to feel like you're doing anything wrong in that situation. What could be more natural, biologically speaking? Hardly my fault at all, really. Like mother nature apologizing for the grass or some shit. Those shades provided cover enough. I won't be made to feel like a creep for this. This chick was a fucking Barbie doll.

I told him "thanks, man" in response to his compliment and it felt weirder than normal

that we had just referred to each other as "man" or maybe I felt stupid because I was repeating his use of "man" and I'm like twenty years older, but what should I have said? I'm too young to use "son" or some equivalent in that situation and "dude" doesn't feel right either, even in retrospect. I tried to gauge some reaction on the face of the girl (did she also think I was cool because of my cool-ass t-shirt?) but there was nothing there. She

probably has no idea about the band KISS. And, honestly, good for her. Going to the tulip farm in her crop top and mini-skirt. She *shouldn't* give a shit about classic rock, ironically or otherwise.

I wouldn't say I was jealous of this guy and his stupid haircut. Also, maybe he was good at fighting (seemed like the type who might be into "jiu jitsu" or whatever) but I had like fifty pounds on him, easy. I could have squashed him, no

problem. Just put him in the ground. But I would never do that because he liked my shirt, obviously. And I'm not a violent man. Not at a tulip farm anyway. Not with the family right there. Oh no. He seemed genuine with his remark about my fashion choice, but if he was being ironic or subtly mocking me, well, so help me god. I would bring hell to his doorsteps. Sure, I have no way of hunting him down like the dog that he is (but he probably isn't).

You just go places and do things when you have kids. Like 30% of the time it feels like something you would definitely not want to do otherwise. Not sure where the tulip farm lands re these statistics. I could see myself going to a tulip farm sans children, perhaps. It's lovely this time of year.

I keep forgetting to meditate. And that might be the saddest sentence I've ever written. I don't even know how to do it

right. But I've tried to budget three minutes (three fucking minutes!) after my shower each day for it. And then I just forget to do it. And I'm sitting at my computer later thinking "I forgot to meditate." I forgot to do this thing I've voluntarily decided to do, that I don't really know *how* to do, that is ostensibly for *my own* benefit and "mental health," and yet... I can't even. So then I get to feel vaguely bad about something else. Something that's not even real.

Lately I've been thinking that all my problems stem from a deep and unshakable fear of death. I know this isn't advanced psychological analysis or anything like that. It's probably a pretty common issue. Feels like the only way to truly "live in the moment" is to shake that fear, however. I have made no inroads insofar as this is concerned. If anything, it gets deeper and darker with age (and – again – I doubt I'm so unique in this department). Still, it feels like

there is a magic switch
somewhere that I
could/should be able to simply
flick off. And I cannot locate
this switch for the life of me.

I have been seeing double
numbers everywhere lately
and I googled what's that all
about and maybe it means I am
reaching a kind of spiritual
awakening phase. That there
are angels or light-seekers
trying to communicate with
me and I am on the right path.
It doesn't feel like I'm on the

right path and obviously
gleaning this from a few
fragments of sentences in the
text beneath the google
search results (not even
clicking on the fucking links)
is a the only correct answer to
this almost certainly 100%
coincidental experience.

Ah, to be born so stupid! Not
stupid in like "I'm a dumb guy"
(things might have been
easier if that was the case,
honestly) but stupid in the
way one lets complacency and

subtle, bubbling resentment
rule their life. Stupid in the
way that even being able to
acknowledge this, to fully
submit to its will, isn't enough
to change, not even one iota.

So I'm seeing 11:11, 12:12, 3:33,
whenever I look at the clock. It
has to mean *something* even if
"something" is just the very
fact that, yes, I am stupid and
have always been.

I could just stop and meditate
right now. There's nothing

stopping me.

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Taking it one day at a time might not be for me. It's always just one day after another anyhow. That number will add up on its own. It doesn't matter what you do or don't do. But I read about kindling and got scared.

So the choice seems to be: lean into this routine (which is

going great) even harder, or: more anguish the likes of which I've never seen. But coming to terms with it being a choice feels like the most difficult aspect.

We went to a brewery the other day and I didn't drink. It was easy and I don't know why it was "easy." I know it won't always be. That's the main question leading into the future, my future: not falling too heavy for/on these easy days. Just accepting them,

same as the hard.

Fatigue sets in sometimes and knowing I won't use that feeling –not right now at least – to slip up/make up for it, does, obviously, lend itself to a certain kind of sloth which seems like a sister to those other, more worrisome feelings.

It's day whatever of whatever, written in stone (red ink) though I know anything can be erased. Needing to find some

higher purpose in that thought, something tangible.

I still feel mostly good and see the potential for fuck-up days looming: they are very specific. Hopefully pushed through the first fuck-up of not eating well (the sister issue). Just trying to focus on all the good work I did in that department and not letting it spiral/snowball further into other poor decisions.

I have such big, bright and

beautiful plans, I think
sometimes. Even if I don't.

I haven't drank in over two
weeks and feel so good. My
heart is more pure. Going to
bed with a soft and steady
heart: the world. Pi Day was
good for me. Wrote a song
called "Meat Coffee."

The times when it feels harder
are becoming more odd, and
more unpredictable. Usually
ten minutes before bed,
strangely enough. Feel like I'm

confronting/combating a kind of inadequacy or boredom in those moments, maybe just fatigue? More fatigue. The gum is helping less and less, sadly. I want to smoke a cigarette but I know that's not it either. Learning now that overeating or eating poorly can be just as much of a disaster as drinking. Well not *just* as much. But bad.

Just looked at myself in the mirror and said, "reset day." Voila. I am an optimist,

inherently. It's actually my greatest attribute. The skin under my eyes is becoming more transparent and that fact (among many others, like the memories that make me get tourettes syndrome) are immaterial. I just press onward. I'm in love with life and I have no interest in taking a mistress (fuck, god, no, why, what).

Day 1 of 1. Ate an omelet, now I'm shitting with the wind on my naked chest. The path

forward is finally clear to me now. I awakened to the universe's signs and saw the message. The light-seekers vs. the jitterbugs: it could not be any simpler. Tomorrow will be easy. But every day could be as easy as tomorrow! We don't count our lucky stars nearly enough, that we weren't born more deranged, with a really fucked up face or disease, something to really drink about, or maybe that's the point? ETC. Honestly, if the hell I've experienced lately

isn't enough to stop, then I'm too stupid to live. I wish there were a way to trigger the hell, just for a second, whenever I inevitably think about fucking up, like just gimme ten seconds of that heart-exploding terror to set myself straight. Can you surgically implant something like that?

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I didn't always think like this, like life had to be some sort of

recorded procession, some collection of thoughts, ordered and fixed and rigid. Fluidity is a foreign concept to me. There are only ultimatums and broken promises and stuck visions of who I'm supposed to be.

This is why I find myself in codes. Out there in the tulip field, I tried to find some order to their colors, their position in each row. It certainly wasn't random, as was my being there in the first place. Some

energies had converged through the earth and the passing of time and how? I'll never know. And yet, all I can think about is the butter-face's tits. Like a miniscule shard of broken glass that you miss, that you know you missed, that will end up in your foot one day. It gets infected. You lose the foot. Then you're the one-legged dad. At school pick-up with a pretty fancy prosthetic and your dumb limp.

The truth is I made up the whole thing. The tulips. The girl. The fucking bleach-stained KISS shirt. It was all an experiment in feeling something new. To escape the failure of my current day-to-day. I'm just a father to thoughts. And an extremely failed diarist. I'm trying to bridge the gap between the two, though. And I saw something in my mind which called me to that farm. There was nothing there, though. I couldn't be unhappy

if I tried.

The only lesson I wish to leave you with, dear readers, is that there is a true path towards happiness in all of us. It starts like this:

Make a list. It can be on your phone or scrawled on an actual pad if you still believe in the analog way of things. Envision your perfect day down to the second and write what you plan to do in ten or twenty minutes blocks. Then, when

you get up in the morning, immediately do something different with each waking moment. It doesn't have to be the polar opposite (e.g., "lift some weights" becomes "eat some chips" or "don't drink" = "get drunk"). The variations can be as subtle or as stark as you like. You'll find that this is the easiest thing in the world to do and that it comes naturally.

This won't feel good at first. It takes practice. And you will

never achieve the kind of fluidity you think you needed in the first place. For so long I thought that my days needed to be like a river: every drop in its exact right place. The motion doesn't work like that. It's not going or coming because – and here's the kicker, boys and girls – there is no path. The motion is circular. It's like a spinning top, a stupid child's toy. And to achieve true happiness you have to be the stupidest, most braindead kid alive. The kind

of kid who can't even get it spinning for one second. Just batting it around like an ape. Some image of perfection (or close enough) plastered in your mind while the reality around crumbles and cries, screams and breaks apart, fades away. It isn't a magic trick. It's easy and it's beautiful and it's happening all the time if you simply stop to notice it.

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