

Does the World Make Sense?

By John DiFelice

Christians will tell you that we all have our crosses to bear in life. For some, it's a disease or loneliness, for others, it's being born without any discernible talent or reason for existing. For Ernie Pendleton, it was his plastic bathtub-shower combo, a piece of engineering feculence so poorly wrought and installed that it made a high-pitched gasp every time he stepped on a spot in the center of the basin. What made this noise unfortunate—unfortunate for Ernie—is that when it was filtered through the three layers of polyurethane that covered his oak flooring, and then passed through the space between the bathroom subfloor and the living room ceiling thick with plaster and lath, it emerged as the salacious moan of a woman nearing orgasm.

This alone would not have been tantamount to Ernie dragging a wooden crossbeam to the summit of a hill where he would be nailed to it and hoisted, naked, to the mockery of all. To understand the comparison, one would have to understand Ernie's wife, Dora, and how, at any point in the day, she became convinced that Ernie was having an affair.

Ernie was not an unpleasant-looking man, but he was not what people would call handsome either. Despite this, a typical morning in Ernie's life included waking alone in his bed to the smells of Dora making coffee downstairs, putting on slippers that were a few loose threads from disintegrating, taking the three steps in his slippers to the edge of the bathtub-shower combo, removing them along with whatever passed for his pajamas the night before (which were often the clothes he wore to the office the day before), turning on the warm shower, and then stepping into it with a nameless apprehension. He always washed his face first, during which time his eyes and mouth would be tightly closed. He would invariably step backward onto the spot that made the

sound that caused the loss of water pressure as the kitchen sink faucet opened full blast, followed by the sounds of the freezer door swinging open and then slamming shut, followed by the sounds of hurried footsteps on the staircase, the opening of the bedroom door, and the creaks of the floor as forceful and determined footsteps made their advance to the shower where Ernie stood naked. Ernie would brace himself for what came next: the bucket of ice water she dumped onto his head, along with the words, “That’s for you and your whore!” before stomping off into the remainder of her morning.

When Ernie described her behavior to friends, they would all ask the same questions. Why don’t you leave her? You know that kind of thing is not normal, don’t you? Why do you put up with her?

“She loves me,” Ernie would reply.

They each would say a variation of “if she loved you, she would trust you” and then stop before stating the most obvious point of all: she was all Ernie had because no other woman would have him.

“You know she’s crazy,” his best friend told him. “Her behavior doesn’t make sense.”

“Well, does the world make sense?” Ernie asked.

When a marriage is opened and laid flat for others to pick apart and analyze, the meaningful parts collapse and are lost. Ernie knew something none of his friends knew, but something Dora had somehow always known: Ernie lusted after every woman he saw. He never did anything about it, never pursued another woman, and wouldn’t have known how to do it had he had the unlikely opportunity. But he salivated over women at the local food co-op; he discreetly leered at women on the train; he committed self-love in the men’s room of his office building to the female subject matter experts of healthcare claims accumulators; he fantasized about the dispossessed

Mexican women on the cleaning crews who began their shifts as he was leaving to go home; he stared longingly at the brown-eyed face behind the counter of the Starbucks in his building; he imagined making passionate love to the guilty-looking Asian woman in her Mazda 3 hatchback as she took shallow drags off a cigarette and obsessively checked her phone. He wanted them all, and fantasized about them so intensely that he felt he had been unfaithful to his wife. In his mind, she was justified in dumping as many buckets of ice water on him as she pleased. There were not enough buckets of ice water in the world to atone for his betrayal.

On the morning of March Fifth, Ernie stepped on the special spot in the tub, heard the usual filling of the bucket, the slamming of the freezer door, the feet stomping up the stairs, the swish of air as the bedroom door opened abruptly, and the freezing cold water and ice that cascaded down over his shoulders and onto his back and legs.

“You better not come home with another woman on you,” she said.

Ernie blamed her threats on his self-diagnosed sexual addiction. Several months back, when he had sought a doctor who specialized in such things, the doctor asked him about the frequency and type of his sexual activity. When Ernie said truthfully that he was having no sex at all, the doctor gave him the phone number of a psychiatrist who specialized in psychosis and wished him the best.

Seeing little hope from the medical establishment, Ernie decided that the best way to cure his lust was to avoid all eye contact with women. If he didn’t see women, he reasoned, then he couldn’t lust after them. He thought of how great it would be if there were a law that required all women to keep their faces hidden, but in the end, he felt that such an idea was the height of selfishness.

Ernie had perfect vision, so he bought a pair of powerful reading glasses to blur his far

sight. It worked flawlessly. When wearing the glasses, he was able to see enough to avoid walking into walls or stop signs, but could not make out any details in a human face. He could barely tell the genders apart, which did result in one embarrassing misunderstanding. A small price to pay, he thought, to shower with confidence.

Everyone at work told him they loved his glasses. He looked like a new man, they said. Halfway through his day, a calm set in that he had never felt before. He did not feel overpowering urges that would cause him to stray from his marriage vows. He no longer felt the need to ogle young women on the company dime. The source of his addiction had finally been removed, and by the cheapest of all means: ten-dollar reading glasses had been his salvation.

Ernie walked the three blocks to his outbound train on the regional rail line on March 5th. The air had a hint of sweetness, like from old wood in a confessional where his carnal sins had been absolved. He cautiously navigated the escalator and stairs leading down to his train platform. He couldn't see anything, and he was happy. Had he been able to see more than six inches in front of his face, he might have noticed the suspicious-looking woman with the baby carriage that held no baby. A flash and a sonic boom later, and Ernie was covered with her. The train pulling into the station had taken most of the blast, which cut a deep hole into it and blew the car from its tracks. Ernie staggered around in a daze amid the substantial casualties, eyes wide open, vision fully restored because the blast had blown the glasses off his face. He looked down at himself and saw that he was covered with another woman. He heard the last thing his wife had said to him before he left for work.

Ernie took a cab home to avoid the ensuing chaos of police sirens, ambulances, reporters, and rubberneckers. The cab driver was too drunk to notice his appearance and didn't ask questions. When Ernie arrived home, he went straight to his bedroom, shower, and undressed. He stepped

into the bathtub-shower combo, but did not turn on the water. He stood under the shower nozzle and took a deep breath. But when he meant to exhale, what came out instead was a prolonged sob, followed by another, and another, and another. He cupped his face with his hands and felt his knees shake. He stepped back onto the spot that created the moan. He heard the kitchen faucet turned on full blast; he heard the footsteps on the stairs; he heard the bedroom door open. He braced himself for his punishment, for the water torture he had come to expect, but the water wasn't cold. It was warm. The water washed the filth and gore from his hair and body. Another bucket came over the curtain rod, pouring down onto him from above. Ernie turned on the water to the shower and stood under it with his eyes squeezed shut, not wanting to open them until the water was clear, until he was clean.

Later that night, Ernie sat on the sofa with his arm around Dora, watching the news coverage of the train bombing. They watched the profiles of the victims, the heartbreaking details of lives cut short. Dora put her hand on Ernie's knee, something she had not done in so long that Ernie could not remember when. He turned to face her as the news anchors put forth theories of who was responsible for the attack. He smiled at her, and she smiled back. They held the gaze for a time until her eyes narrowed and her smile fell as she spoke.

“You're lucky that wasn't perfume.”