

Shane Holly
202 E. 12th St. APT 605
Tucson, AZ 85701
480-748-0910
sjholly11@gmail.com

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AVOID
by
Shane Holly

The Void is all powerful, the very force which animates the universe. The Great Negation from which our Something slithers blithely in rhythms both circuitous and chaotic—no matter, all matter taking shapes either solitary or repeated—no matter; the not-thing across which we are splayed and dripping: sweat, semen, blood.

This is what Ted thinks but not what Ted says. Instead, after taking a fractional moment to force himself to look straight through his pale blue eyes, to blink wetly and meet the gaze of the quivering paranoiac on the seat across from him, he says, “I want you to try running. Don’t get fancy Nikes. Don’t get Bluetooth headphones and an arm band to hold your iPhone. Just go outside and run. As soon as you get home. Go outside and run.”

“No but I’ve tried—” Ted silences him with a raised palm. A classic Ted move.

“That’s all for now,” he says coolly as he gets up from the table and leaves without another word. The coffee shop is loud and crowded. Espresso steam and mug clinks punctuate the caffeinated chatter that grips a place like this. As a rule, Ted meets his clients in one of three places: a coffee shop, reserved for the paranoid and anxious; an amusement park for the lethargic and obese; or an art museum, only for the most clinically depressed. The atmosphere, Ted finds, must match the state of the client’s mind for his sessions to work. Not necessarily their current

emotional state, but the aggregate, the general vibe—it should echo their neuroses and desires. This inward/outward alignment allows the physical intimacies of the conversation (the proximity, the breathing, the strange warmth of vocal cords) to be an external analogue for the vulnerability and emotional growth that the client is hoping and paying for. Through these rather inane individual quirks—the palm raising, the abrupt walkouts—Ted manages to foster something like a guru’s gestalt. A sage, if not aloof, façade. Why? Some say, of course, because he’s a genius. Others, because he’s a terrible life coach. An egomaniac. Overcompensating. Ted would say, if anyone asked him, it’s because he’s unlicensed.

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Anyone who knows Ted’s personal life, the interior landscape of his mind or his bedroom, would have one very natural question: how did *you* become a life coach? But people don’t know Ted’s personal life. They don’t see his sink full of week-old bowls, each one a petri dish of putrefaction. They don’t see the cereal dinners eaten from his supine stomach or the hours spent staring at the water-stained popcorn ceiling of his apartment. People don’t know Ted, so the question is moot, or better yet, unasked. The curiosity of the contradiction left unexplored, the irony consumes itself, rendering his life nothing more than a collection of stupid facts. And maybe not even that, as facts require witness. The beautiful horror of solitude is that you achieve total freedom. Untethered, you drift silent among the fallen trees of your non-history. And no one hears, really, the thud as his body slumps off the couch, the more pronounced bang as his head hits the corner of the coffee table, the clinks and clanks as his flailing hand hits three spoons in three cereal bowls from the past three days that he has spent inside, the slowly amplifying groan that morphs into a “Fuuuuuuck!”

From this vantage, Ted can see under his couch, and he wishes he hadn't. Clumps of dust and hair so prolific it would only be acceptable if he had a Golden Retriever and back problems. Instead, he has a headache that makes it hard to look straight and a half-eaten pizza that was left out all night. Still on the ground, he grabs a slice, lowers the tip into his open mouth, then carefully lays the slice across his chest, allowing the chewing motion to pull the pizza into his face without the use of his hands, which he folds across his belly, settling into a kind of resolute calm, his tongue conveyor churning, his eyes open wide to the reality of the undercouch.

A recurring mental exchange takes place:

GURU TED: Get off the floor. Stand up and don't stop standing for a whole day.

FLOOR TED: You're on the floor, dipshit.

GURU TED: If I am you then you are me.

PIZZA-MOUTH TED: Ooohhhhhh!

GURU TED: You think recognizing irony is an ascension? That seeing both ends of a contradiction places you outside their borders?

PIZZA-CHIN TED: Chewing. Chewing. Chewing.

GURU TED: Awareness is deification?

FLOOR TED: You know why genies always poof away on TV? To remind the audience that they aren't real.

He stands up, sending the pizza crust that had been wedged beneath his chin tumbling down his front, caroming off his shoe and skidding underneath the couch. A small twitch toward kneeling. A pause. He sighs. He slumps onto the couch. He picks up the remote. Turns on the TV. He doesn't choose an app. He opens his phone. Looks up porn. Pulls his pants to his ankles.

He opens Netflix and quickly puts on *The Great British Bake Off*. He chooses a video. Starts working his dick. Mary Berry says, “Soggy bottom.” At some point, he cums.

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Not quite an amusement park but close enough, thinks Ted, as he winds his way through a jury-rigged maze of steel barricades. More like a sad shuffle, as feet, occasionally catching a rock finally freeing itself from decades of tar-inflicted paralysis, scrape forward, two steps at a time, toward a trailer donning a cardboard sign with the word TICKETS, slightly askew, screen printed on its center. In front of him, a father and his young son, hand-in-hand, solemnly enact the shuffle without fanfare. They understand the game. They know that on Saturdays this is a parking lot filled with baseball fans. They know that in four weeks none of this will be here. It’ll be as if it never happened. The State Fair—its grandeur, or whatever it can scrape together and call grandeur, derives from this disappearing act. A stately tour de force: tents, barricades, light fixtures and trash cans, thrill rides assembled and disassembled limb from limb, convoluted children’s games and plush animals, speakers destined to cycle through the same four gnawing pop tracks, a stage where local folk singers will pluck their unoriginal original songs and the local agriculture association will hold a Q&A on their completely safe and healthy use of pesticides, truckloads of turkey thighs, enough soda to fill Shamu’s tank... Construction against the Void, Ted thinks to himself, actually voicing the words inside his mind.

Tilting his head way back to make eye contact with his father, the little boy says, “Can we ride the Octo-Tron?”

“Until we puke,” responds the father with a smile.

#

At the base of Sky Leap, a bungee jump apparatus that looks like a miniature of the Gateway Arch, Carlos sits on a bench, taking up more than half of its seating area, his mass pressed flat and wide across the rigid metal bars. He has a turkey thigh in his hand and has just taken a bite when Ted rounds the corner. He holds up the drumstick in exasperation and then drops his shoulders and head in tandem, a coordinated and practiced display of despair.

“I know, I know,” says Carlos as soon as Ted enters earshot. “This was a test, I know. And—” he holds the turkey up to his face, looks at it like a ventriloquist dummy and lets out a harsh little laugh, “I failed!” There’s sadness in his voice. And more than a little reproach. But there’s also exasperation, relinquishment, freedom.

“This wasn’t a test,” says Ted, the guru.

“Right,” says Carlos, trying to figure him out. “But I failed regardless, huh? Guess the only thing worse than failing a test is failing when there wasn’t even a test to fail.”

There’s always a test to fail, thinks Ted, but he rejects it. That’s reciprocating. He needs to counter, to resist.

“Carlos, you succeeded. Don’t you see?”

“Succeeded at being a fat ass, right?” he says with another punchy laugh.

This guy’s going to be tough. Guru-resistant.

“You succeeded in your desires. You succeeded in responding to your environment. You succeeded in being a human.”

“If *this*,” he says bitterly, holding up the now half-eaten turkey leg, “is success, then why the hell do I need you?”

Finally, an entry point. Ted sits down next to him.

“Interesting, isn’t it, my profession? *Life coach*. Kind of absurd. The one thing we don’t have to learn. The one thing we just innately *do*: living. And yet we seek coaching.” Carlos takes a bite, listening. “It’s a misnomer. I won’t coach you on how to live, call the plays, analyze your performance. I will live alongside you. I will introduce another voice to your inner monologue. You see, those of us that are unhappy with our lives are alone. Incredibly alone. Regardless of the number of friends and family in our lives, we’re utterly alone.”

Ted lets this last line sit as he looks into the sky pensively. He tries to remember where the funnel cake stand is. The silence builds, hovering impossibly at the edges of the circus music, the laughter, the rumble of the rides and the screams of the riders, hovering like a body atop a bed of needles. Just when he senses that Carlos is about to say something, to shatter the silence that had become too significant for him, Ted turns to him and says, “I want you to sit here, for at least an hour, eating that turkey leg. Eat it slowly. With each bite, think about how lonely you are. Think about how isolating that desire was. That greasy richness pulling you to the stand. Let the leg get cold. Notice how the flavors change, the textures. Notice how your thoughts change. Allow yourself to cry. Because it’s sad, Carlos. It’s really fucking sad.”

#

Ted awakes from a cat nap with a start. He looks at his phone. It’s 4 p.m. A partially cloud-hidden sun casts a sideways light through his window, slightly ajar. Opened under the sun’s zenith, he had looked out at the slurry of leaves and stucco and concrete and bark with a noontime hopefulness. It was one of those sun-drenched moments of calm where everything is thrown into such stark relief that one is helpless to at least a fleeting belief that they are frozen in time and that everything, crawling and still, is immutable and suspended in this perpendicular alignment of celestial bodies.

Now, with this yellowing light seeping through his sleep-sagged eyes he feels vacant and obtuse: another wasted afternoon peeling away from his damp and pallid flesh.

He rolls to stuff his face back into his pillow when his phone pings.

This is your Door Dash driver. I'm in the lobby.

“Shit.” He looks around groggily. He has no shirt or pants on. “Shit!” He shakes his head, trying to rid himself of this sleep fog. Slowly, it begins to clear, and he remember that he started a load of laundry (one containing the entirety of his meager wardrobe) before placing an order and falling asleep. Wet and mildewed, all his clothes are down the hall. Another ping.

Left it on the counter.

His stomach growls, and he resolves to make a run for it. Poking his head through his narrowly cracked door, he peers down the hallway in quick jerks of the neck—left and then right. All clear. He jogs the length of the hallway, his dick flopping in the loose and exposing fabric. He reaches the elevator and presses the button but opts instead for the stairs. Taking two steps at a time he races down the spiraling stairwell, keeping his hand on the banister, enjoying the echoing hiss from his palm, the way it lifts and softens the rhythmic thumping of his foot pads on the concrete steps. Another cartoonish head-peak from the stairwell door reveals an empty lobby save for the leasing agent behind the front desk. A soft-featured boy with a branded polo tucked into cargo shorts worn too high on the waist. He sits straight-backed and writes an email with a dull, almost unsettling smile smeared across his cheeks. Next to him sits the plastic take-out bag, handles tied into a bow still erect from being held, the weight of Ted’s order having pulled at and stretched the plastic’s polymers.

He waits. Two minutes. Five. Again, his stomach growls, and he breaks. He shoves open the stairwell door with confidence and strides to the desk. The leasing agent looks on wide-eyed

and open-mouthed. Ted grabs the bag of food and turns on a heel. Finally, the agent manages to stammer, “Sir. You need to wear clothes in here!”

Ted stops and turns to face him. Without missing a beat, he says, “And how!” with a southern drawl and limp wrist. He turns and walks away briskly, unsure what *that* was. Halfway to the stairwell, to safety, to an escape from this rapidly diminishing shroud of confidence he managed to conjure about himself, he’s frozen in place by a blaring alarm. He turns once again toward the leasing agent, whose eyes immediately meet his, matching his shocked and furrowed look, vaguely accusatory, each man convinced that the other somehow instigated the siren’s wailing. Locked in the tension that exists between bodies that refuse to accept a shared coincidence as such, the two men are only shaken from their trance when the stairwell door swings wide, spilling a stream of residents into the lobby, propelled by their subdued chatter, those solemn pleasantries that accompany groups of humans in casual emergency: the jokes, the complaints, the reassurance of society in the face of flames.

They spill in and toward his terror, his shame. Ready to bask in it and suffocate him with it. Spilling, diffusing, the residents spread across the lobby, around him, past him. Everyone is surrounded. He’s safe. He laughs—crisis having sprung up, Void-emerged, to wrap him up and conceal his nakedness, to connect with a great graphical line his outlying behavior to the general trend of society. And as the anxious bodies chat, look at phones, cross arms and shuffle feet, Ted sits on the nearby couch, opens his bag, and starts eating, with little stabs and yanks of his wooden chopsticks, pieces of his egg foo young, looking around wildly as he chews, smiling at the absurd.

“It’s absurd.”

“It’s *abstract*.”

“It’s upsetting.”

“It’s *evocative*.”

“I’m angry.”

“It’s a controversial piece.”

“No, I’m angry with you, Sharon.”

The woman, wearing neat slacks and blouse, a coat draped urbanely over forearm, pushes black hair behind her ear and looks at the man to her left.

“Don’t be silly,” she says as she places a hand on his shoulder. “Come on.” Gently guiding him, right hand clutching his right bicep, her left hand stroking his back, they move to the next painting, revealing to Ted, who was sitting on the viewing bench behind them, the subject of their discussion: a small work, square, about two and a half feet on either side.

Malevich’s *Black Square*, on loan from the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. The painting is just that—a white canvas inlaid with a black square. Painted with force and feeling, the brushstrokes teem with life, the artist asserting his presence in the throes of the liminal, assuring the viewer of his intention to exist—outside of natural form, as a consciousness, a soul, to exist in spite of the Void. The white plaque next to the painting, quoting Malevich, reads, “It is from zero, in zero, that the true movement of being begins.” Ted reads and rereads this sentence. It’s perhaps not surprising that this resonates deeply with him. To have one’s thoughts reflected back to oneself across the gulf of history is a powerful and edifying experience. So why does Ted feel so brittle? As if these words, in his head, on the plaque, were cut out of paper and flapping limply in the AC current sputtering from the vent above his head?

Finding himself back in his body, training his eye, carving out chunks of information, he becomes aware that he has been looking, for the last several minutes, not at the painting itself but the extensive network of cracks across its surface. “The considerable cracking, or craquelure,” the plaque explains, “is likely a result of Malevich’s method of applying paint over other layers of semi-wet paint.”

Frailty, thinks Ted. In his attempt to transmit his vitality onto the canvas he ensured its very impermanence. This ode to “pure non-objectivity” as Malevich wrote is just the opposite: decidedly an object, decaying and fading away. And beneath its cracked surface, the white canvas shines through, in places even patches of color appear, past work, discarded ideas, the indecision and machinations of the artist, hideously here, now, on display. Or maybe it’s beautiful, the most beautiful aspect of the painting; Ted can’t tell. But surely, he decides, Malevich would find it hideous. Yes, you can feel his disgust, his hatred, plunging brush into slick black nothing, flinging it across these silly splashes of color, these more delicate abstractions, vivid with their trifling emotiveness. Indeed, Ted sees now in the brushwork the blunt violence of a man who has thought himself into assuredness, a brutalist negation of feeling so complete it belies all counterarguments. Slapping black paint atop wet black paint, straightening the edges and squaring off the corners, he steels himself against the world, against himself and his viewers, people like Sharon’s husband and people like Ted, people who bring to the canvas their quibbles and their soul’s aching, their frustrations and tribulations. Zeroed out in this black mirror, the viewers are flung in one of two directions: toward Malevich’s cleanly crafted abstraction, blissful, blank, and apt to utter words like *beautiful*, or deep and violently into themselves, feeling everything, primarily the pulse of blood in their head, pouring oxygen into thoughts that don’t work.

Is this not just a distraction? thinks Ted angrily, helplessly swinging to the very outer reaches of sensical thought. Hasn't the entire universe, its undulations, its expansions and contractions, its vastness and vacuous mystery, hasn't it been conspiring all this time to make me get up, clean my dishes, go to the grocery store, and make a nutritious meal? Perhaps the grand nothingness of existence is the very path, the asphalt and the cement upon which my tire should press impossibly close on Sunday-morning bike rides! Perhaps the very weight of the Earth is compressed into the dumbbell that should be lifted from my hip to my chest to my hip! But no. This line of thinking he also rejects. Not on any thorough philosophical grounds, but because it's giving him a headache.

His thoughts veer wildly about his brain like a car dealership inflatable. The only coherent sentence he can muster, floating to the surface of his mind like scum from this boiling nonsense, is: *This is awfully silly, isn't it?*

GURU TED: You see now, don't you?

HANDS-ON-HEAD TED: All I do is see. I don't see a thing!

GURU TED: You understand now, don't you?

DRAWING-SIDELONG-GLANCES TED: Understand? Understand?! You've got to be kidding me.

GURU TED: I understand you.

PACING-AND-HEAD-SLAPPING TED: Everything we've done has been not-understanding.

Don't you get that? We're professional not-understanders.

GURU TED: I understand you.

ATTRACTING-SECURITY-GUARD-ATTENTION TED: There's nothing to understand.

Nothing!

GURU TED: I understand you.

GETTING-ARTFULLY-ESCORTED-OUT TED: . . .

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Weightlessly untangling his legs from a lotus position, Ted, the guru, rises from the viewing bench and stands erect, hands folded serenely behind his back, and stares deep into the black square before him. The young man to his right, short, skinny, and pale, looks up at him nervously. It's been three minutes of silence and he's wondering if he misspent his parents' money.

"What is the nature of your sadness?" Ted finally asks.

"I—uh . . . well, how do you mean?" stammers the boy.

Ted's eyes snap finally from the painting, charged with ferocious indignation, the kind of loving reproach only a pallbearer of Happiness could muster. The weight of this indignation rests, only for a moment, in his eyes, which burn half-crazed on this trembling youth, but it quickly slides down to his lips. More suited for such responsibility, they spread accommodately into a sinister smile. "Is it chemical? Tied to traumatic memories? Or perhaps it's physical, living inside the flesh of a missing father, a bygone lover?"

"Oh, uh. I guess it's pretty chemical. Maybe some of the traumatic one too?"

Ted shakes his head, frustrated that he answered his question. "Do you think you could pick it up? Put it in a box?"

"Huh?"

"Can't it be moved? Displaced?"

"Uh, I really don't know. Do you think it can?"

"Do I? Do I?! Can't you find somewhere to put it?"

“We’re talking about my sadness?”

“Do you see this black square?”

“Are you alright, man?”

“Do you see this square?!”

“Yes, I see it!”

“And you think there’s no place for your sadness? In this great big world? You think it has to live in your body?”

Ted, the guru, leaves. The depressed man is left with a lot to think about.

The End