

English Muffins Are For Closers  
or: a treatise on the condition of the 21st century heart  
A short story by Jakob Free  
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*If only I didn't care so much  
 For the feel of your cold, cold touch  
 In every bed I leave behind  
 Is it human to adore life?*

*I understand the urgency of life  
 In the distance there is truth which cuts like a knife  
 Maybe I will die maybe tomorrow so I need to say*

*I adore life*

*I adore life  
 Do you adore life?*

- Savages

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[This is the way people like you exist.]

**1:**

**This is your migratory pattern:**

The first 18 years of life are spent in one of the nearly identical suburban utopias throughout Long Island, New York, where you are shown a world that doesn't even exist, but for years you are told that not only is the lifestyle on display in these places indeed real--it is *attainable*. You believe that the poor are an anomaly, that they are a *minority*. Your father and mother wield currency like weaponry. Doors open and never close behind them. Life is never uncomfortable.

You are fed the slop of religion and the promise of a future that you are wholly in control of. Upon completion of high school, if you have managed to *not* impregnate or be impregnated; to stay out of the penal system; to evade the sharp beak of drug abuse; then you move on to one of several universities in the Northeast or Midwest.

Following graduation, the next step is invariably a neighborhood called Murray Hill, the thumping heart of the transplant society that plagues the East side of Manhattan. You've taken to calling it "Murray Hell" but most people who live there react as if you've cursed their mother when you mention it in this fashion. If you're a female, you work in fashion because that has been your dream for as long as you can remember. Textiles, merchandising, design, showroom, recruitment, etc. Males have a slightly more varied set of jobs with which to choose from. Those jobs are investment banking, accounting (and other subsets of finance, whatever the hell that means) and sales. Sometimes you'll meet someone you went to high school with and he'll tell you he's a lawyer now but it's usually best to stay away from those kind of people. Doctors are even

worse because the only type of person who ever becomes a doctor is a man or woman so completely devoid of personality (unless of course, they are a pediatrician and then in that case they have way *too much* personality) that they must elevate their status in society to become worthwhile of anyone's attention.

After doing hard time in Murray Hell the next stop is the Upper East Side. This shows maturity and refinement. It says "I like the look of a nice white family. I'm a young professional. I'm ready to take the next step. My father may or may not have a boat."

A suitable mate is then sought out and usually acquired in the evolutionarily standardized practices of displaying great wealth and being "nice." Then marriage, pregnancy (producing up to 3 children), and exodus. Return to the ancestral land. Rinse. Repeat.

You are absolutely not there yet.

**To elaborate:**

- You were indeed born on Long Island.
- You did not prematurely spawn offspring.
- You were not incarcerated (but came close one night years back, while you were in high school, when you stole a safe from some Armenian kid's grandmother's house with a bunch of your stoner friends).
- Try as you might, you were unable to addict yourself to any known narcotic or otherwise brain-altering substances.
- You did not attend any of the standard-fare universities.
- You did not, at any time, live in Murray Hell.
- You do work in sales.
- You do currently occupy an undersized apartment in the Upper East Side, but you do not like the look of a nice white family, nor does your father currently own--nor has he ever owned--a boat or otherwise seafaring vehicles.
- Mate? Forget about it. You can hardly afford electricity let alone find someone who will go on a second date with you.

And by now you should be doubting the feasibility of this plan, the one followed by so many of those who occupy your (now former) socio-economic status. For Christ's sake, you're almost 30. Women with whom you've engaged in raucous bouts of animal sex in foul bathrooms in even fouler bars are now married with children and scheduling haircut appointments for their canines. Can you see how far away you are from that?

They say the body sheds all of its cells every seven years and brother, you are due for a major shedding.

**2:**

**This is what you do for a "living:"**

You work in the sales department of a very large and very evil corporation. The corporation is so large in fact, that it is legally considered a sovereign nation residing within U.S. borders. This factoid troubles you for a number of reasons, chief among them being that you had no idea that such a thing was even legal before you began to work for this corporation.

The name of the corporation is not important. It is a name even a poor child living in the mega-slums of Mumbai would know, most likely due in part to the fact that the boy or girl is living in a mega-slum and

not just a run-of-the-mill slum *because* this corporation set up shop in India a decade ago and destabilized it entirely. Destabilized it with pollution: theme-park pollution and manufacturing pollution and electronic pollution and several other types of pollution you've never even heard about, nor considered.

Your specific role within the company is simple. You stay in incredibly low-quality hotels around the country for extended periods of time. During these periods you pilot a rental vehicle of similar quality and you attempt to sell a very specific and very useless kind of product to gullible senior citizens. The product could be anything. Just have someone think of the most useless, most unaffordable thing they own. Tell them to hold the image of it in their mind.

Whatever they're thinking about right then and there is *not* the product. The actual product is much more useless and unaffordable than what they imagined.

The method with which you use to convince potential buyers of the value of this product is a simple lie. This lie takes the shape of an easy-breezy financing plan. The financing plan however is anything but easy. It is *most assuredly* not breezy either. It is chock-full of hidden fees and mutating interest-rates that activate in a variety of act-of-god-type scenarios. And the bar for "act of god," according to your employer, is very, very low. If it is a person's intention to bankrupt their household, and they require assistance, then you are the man for the job.

At this very moment you are sitting at the bar in a hotel of very low-standing. You are drinking whiskey from a dirty glass with a few sad looking ice cubes in it. You have just ordered the caprise panini. The middle-aged bartender with a long snaking scar along her jawline--mayhaps from a nip'n'tuck gone horribly wrong--who coughed up a lung for an interminable amount of time before she was able to ask you what you wanted to drink, recommended this panini to you.

"Our chef has been here for twenty-five years," she says. "His grandmother's recipe. Eye-talian."

"That's really quite lovely," you say, and you remind her that you'd like a side-order of beer-battered french fries. She shuffles off into the kitchen.

You sip your drink and you wait for your panini and your fries and you watch the semi-functioning television hanging above the bar. The News is on. The News is relaying to you a host of terrible events, encounters, and outcomes. People are dead. A sports team that you hate has won. That senator who is running for president has accrued enough delegates to successfully become the nominee for their party. This is a process you cannot even grasp at, though you have read the Wikipedia page for this specific voting procedure half a dozen times. A series of hashtags zoom across the screen so fast that you can barely read them. Cars crash. Trees fall. Lightning cleaves a farmhouse in two. If the world hadn't already ended for you, it would certainly be ending right the fuck now.

### **3:**

#### **This is what happened to you:**

For the first few years, you loved her from afar.

You were an intern at Tech Startup #456 and she was three years your senior. You had a job that felt important and for the first time in your entire semi-adult life, you felt needed.

Watching her from your little cube in the corner of the gigantic open floor plan, you saw an entire future play out, as if you were tunneling through to another quantum reality, one that just might occur if the right pieces fell into place. You saw the opening salvo of awkward first dates, of family trees diagrammed out into eternity; you figured out one another's politics without being too savage about your differences; you chose restaurants that you couldn't afford but offered to pick up the check regardless. Your first kiss: tentative, gentle, and of course, in the rain. This was a fantasy you put a lot of work into. There was a score, there was lighting; you had a budget.

Every now and then she would approach the bullpen where the interns were sequestered and, speaking to the group and no one in particular, she would request help on a project that was giving her trouble. It was usually something that required a grand heap of menial labor. Mind-bendingly boring data entry, most likely. You were always the first to volunteer. And your friends were grateful to not have to do whatever it was that needed doing. But eventually it became clear that you were a zealot. If she had asked for help from the group while you were on break or in the bathroom or smoking a cigarette with the kid from the design department, you would find the person who she had assigned the job to, and convince them to give it to you instead. You usually didn't have a problem getting them to give you what you wanted.

Five jobs. Ten. Fifteen. Then she noticed you. Then she began to appreciate you.

"What's your name again?" she said.

You told her.

"I'm--" she began.

"I know who you are," you said. "I mean, everyone knows."

Later, when you were hired full-time, you became friends. And then, in the way that these things sometimes go, you became lovers.

It was a fast year, a good year. You learned about one another in the way that only people who sleep together can. You spoke in the quiet of night, in the moments before unconsciousness; you spoke about your dreams of becoming something more than what you already were, she of her desire to become a "capitalist pig" (her words, not yours). She wanted money and recognition and comfort, and she was content in knowing that soon she would have it. She spoke of her mother and father, who both lay dying somewhere in the same hospital in a faraway state. You got the impression that she thought she might be able to save them if the timing and money were right.

You told her the tales of your youth, the comedic adventures of an anarchic punk with too much time on his hands. These were the stories you had used in the past to disarm female conquests, but here the telling was different: it was you bearing the inner-workings of the neurological machine sometimes called a "soul." You had made the incision, you had torn it open, and you had spilled your guts.

But things are not all meant to last.

For whatever reason, chaos reigns supreme in your life. There are people--and you know them--who simply *live*. Their problems, such as they are, are trite--they usually revolve around being late or chipped teeth or too few followers on Instagram. But you, my friend, have never lived an emotionally stable moment in your entire adult life. You quiver with anxiety, your molecules practically vibrate with nervous energy. Everything that can go wrong does go wrong. And you could never do anything to stop it.

Which is why one day she just up and left.

You had recently gotten a big-boy job, the one you now currently have, in fact, and had taken to working later and harder (but not necessarily better) and she had grown distant and cold. Her moods were erratic and unexplainable. Sometimes you could hear her crying into her pillow in the dead of the night. You would reach out for her, but she'd stop and assure you everything was okay. It went on like that for some months.

And just as if this amazing, insane, impossible fantasy that you had been lived for a year never really happened, you walked into the lobby of her apartment building. Her doorman was standing there waiting for you.

"You can't go up there, sir," he said. He looked the way doctors look on TV when they have to tell someone that their husband or wife died on the operating table.

"What are you talking about?" you said, trying to remember the man's name, but coming up blank. This made you feel awkward and elitist. Here was this man guarding the love of your life every night, and you couldn't even engage him on a first-name basis.

"New tenants," he said. "We had to throw out her old guest list."

"Guest list?" you said. "I was here yesterday. You know me."

"I know you, yeah," he said. "But you can't go up."

You became irate. The blood had drained from your face.

"What do you mean I can't go up? I practically live here. You know me! Where is she? I demand that you tell me what's going on."

"Sir, you'll have to leave," the doorman said. "I'm going to call the police if you don't leave."

It's possible that you were broken from the start, from the day you had been brought home. It's possible that your parents just didn't nail it, that they created something ever-so-slightly *wrong*. But you made the best of what you had; you had your ups and downs, but you did your best. But what happened *that* night? You will remember it forever. It will be the last thought your mind spools up before you shuffle off this mortal coil. That was the night that tore you in half. Forget battered. Forget broken. Forget little non-vital pieces of you flaking off and disintegrating with time. There was before that night and then after that night. If you weren't fucked up before, then you are certainly fucked up now. You are not a nobody—you are an un-body.

#### 4:

#### This is what you're doing now:

You're burying yourself deep inside the bartender, the one from earlier who used the outmoded "eye-talian" pronunciation for people of Italian heritage. While you thrust your hips back and forth with a speed and efficiency only truly depressed people can muster, you try to forgive this woman for her lack of sensitivity for hardworking Italian-Americans. You cannot bring yourself to do so. As a matter of fact, you

have come to the realization that you do not like this woman. You might even hate her. And that potential hatred is only fueling your desire to fit as much of your human form inside of her as possible. Conflicting for sure, but you don't even possess the bandwidth to analyze your feelings even momentarily.

Your flight leaves in one hour. You will most likely miss it.

You had plans, didn't you? Small plans and great, big ones and everything in between. You wanted to see them all through, and you would have. If only she had let you. If only you could've been whatever it was she had expected you to be.

Montauk, San Fran, Milan and so forth. You would've saved up for first class, maybe. You would've shown her your worldliness, your sophisticated side. Played tour guide and professoré. Nothing touristy, nothing kitschy. Real travel. You would have remembered all the names of all the famous streets and you would have never asked for directions.

How long would you have waited before you asked her to marry you? God, it's scary to think about, isn't it? It's scary to know how easy it would've been to just say the words. You used to think diamond rings were for vapid sub-humans with their self-worth tied up in rocks and metal. But how quickly would you have forgone that notion? How quickly would you have plunked down the change?

But instead you're here, somehow.

And then you come. And it is a whimper not a bang, a Pyrrhic victory. Isn't that what the term is reserved for? So much has been lost. So much of yourself. You wonder if you'll ever be whole. If you'll ever step out of this grey pall that hangs in front of your eyes.

The bartender sits at the edge of the bed and smokes thin cigarettes. Her spine is like the ridge along the back of a dinosaur. She seems monstrous and sickly in the light of the cheap hotel fluorescents. Nothing seems real to you anymore. You wish she'd put on some clothes.

"What are you gonna do?" the bartender says without turning around. An idea occurs to you: this could be someone's mother. God in heaven, she's almost old enough to be *your* mother.

"About what?" you say.

"Didn't you say you had somewhere to be? A plane to catch?"

You breathe in deeply. The air is infused with her smoke, but beyond that you detect a staleness, an *emptiness*. "Perhaps I'll sit in this room for a while," you say.

She stands and walks over to the small wooden table in the corner of the room. Her body tells a story of trials and tribulations, or hard times and missed opportunities. Her skin is sallow, her hair wiry and unkempt. Despite all of that, she has a sort of pride about her, a world-wearied too-many-years-in-the-shit-and-still-standing vibe that you manage to drum up some respect for.

She stubs out her cigarette in an ashtray and swigs from the bottle of cheap whiskey she brought to the room. You are only slightly drunk. Drunk enough for a decision like this. Drunk enough not to wear a condom, although surprisingly she offered you one from her own supply (ribbed for your pleasure). Drunk enough that you might still want her.

You'll go to bed with her one more time and then you'll leave.

5:

This is where you go:

You drive to the ocean. It takes three hours to get there. For a long stretch of time the radio plays nothing but static. You don't mind; the air conditioning is on the fritz, so you ride with the windows down and the sound of the wind drowns out everything anyway.

You arrive in the parking lot of a public beach club but there are no parked cars, no one in sight. It's not beach weather. You take off your shoes and socks and place them neatly on the front passenger seat.

As you walk toward the ocean (calm, dark blue, welcoming) you crunch the numbers.

Seven months. Four days. Three hours. Twenty four seconds.

That's how long it's been since you've heard from her. It's not exact. You're actually counting down from the last text message you ever received from her. Surely you saw her sometime after you received it but you cannot, for the life of you, recall what those last moments together were like. Nothing of note occurred. No indication that anything was wrong. So you count down from the text, because it haunts your every waking moment (and not infrequently, your dreaming moments).

*English muffins or bagels. Butter. Orange juice. Coffee.*

That's all it said. The sheer domesticity of it...a grocery list for Christ's sake. It was nothing to you back then. A regular occurrence. But when you look upon it now you're reminded of this exchange from *Apocalypse Now*:

**Kurtz:** Did they say why, Willard, why they want to terminate my command?

**Willard:** I was sent on a classified mission, sir.

**Kurtz:** It's no longer classified, is it? Did they tell you?

**Willard:** They told me that you had gone totally insane, and that your methods were unsound.

**Kurtz:** Are my methods unsound?

**Willard:** I don't see any method at all, sir.

**Kurtz:** I expected someone like you. What did you expect? Are you an assassin?

**Willard:** I'm a soldier.

**Kurtz:** You're neither. You're an errand boy, sent by grocery clerks, to collect a bill.

*Errand boy.* You went to three separate bodegas before you gave up on acquiring English Muffins. No, there were only bagels. Bodega bagels at that. Mediocre. A joke in the bagel-eating community.

It's possible she never loved you.

It's possible.

You stare out beyond the ocean. It's getting dark. The horizon line is a clear delineation between the heavens above and the cold water below.

It is possible.

Because, after all, English Muffins are for closers.

**end.**