

An Urgent Errand

Mr Jones had recently finished preparing his body for the oncoming day and could still taste the minty tang of toothpaste, clinging to the contours of his teeth, as he paced towards the front door. Filled with early morning purpose, he had chosen to overlook breakfast in favour of completing his errands, and had even decided against returning to the kitchen to take his vitamin supplements, such was his rush. As he exited onto the street, closing the latched front door behind him, he noticed when running his tongue along the roof of his mouth a small cut beside his left molar. This, at the time, struck him as being of little significance and he continued to bound onto the pavement and, whilst licking the small rim of flesh around the tooth, felt the salty drip of blood trickle onto his taste buds.

The day had already awoken without him, the sun was lightly toasting the trees and busses, gorged with commuters, cut the air as they drove past. One of them had stopped next to Mr Jones and he noticed as he glanced across, not breaking his stride, a rather fat woman squashed between two suited men at the back of the lower deck eating a sandwich. Her pale face was mapped with a series of what seemed like burst capillaries and sweat dripped down the sides of her cheek, settling at the base of her neck. Mr Jones continued to walk along the road and, as the bus began to drive away, he glanced at the woman again to see her bite into the sandwich, globules of mayonnaise falling from the edges of the bread and onto her chin, mixing with the beads of sweat that had already accumulated there. The sight, which he found faintly disgusting, reminded him that he had not eaten anything yet and the area below his rib cage and above his bladder began to tingle slightly at the thought of food. Stopping only for a moment to finger around the outside of his pocket in case he had forgotten his keys, he remembered the steak he had eaten the previous night on returning home and how the wet meat juices had dripped and stained his suit trousers as he placed it within the oiled frying pan. The woman on the bus, he thought, looked slightly like steak with her rosy cheeks covered in sweaty juices and mayonnaise, slightly warm from the contact with her flesh. Mr Jones was momentarily puzzled by what he thought a slightly strange image but after remembering he was in a hurry, quickly resumed walking and crossed the road in order to take the correct turning.

Continuing down the side road, he soon came to the gates of the park he often used as a short cut and entered underneath them, watching his own shadow rub itself against the wall as he passed. He noticed that the park was empty with only a keeper in a green jacket sweeping soiled wrappings of various foodstuffs and empty cans into a heap beside a bin. Again there was the dull ache inside his stomach, this time with more intensity than before and Mr Jones felt the juices of his innards squelch and the wedge of muscle near his abdomen spasm slightly. He was now on a path to the edge of the park that was isolated from the rest by rows of trees and bushes on either side, and despite this new discomfort he continued marching with a greater sense of urgency. As he walked he again ran his tongue across the ceiling of his mouth from right to left, feeling the chip on his incisor and arriving at the small tag of skin where the cut was. He was now more aware of his hunger and could feel for the first time the empty space inside him becoming increasingly cavernous and his head becoming increasingly light.

With every step he now took the rows of trees that stood at either side seemed to slightly alter in shape. Mr Jones began to see, as he struggled to shake off his sudden bout of dizziness, that the branches arching over him were starting to take the form of hands, each holding a set of green leaves and offering them to him as a waiter would offer canapés. Struggling to maintain his pace he continued to walk on, putting down this mild delusion to an empty stomach and began to regret having passed over his breakfast and vitamin supplements. The further he walked the stranger the trees began to appear and the stronger the spasms within

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his innards became. The rows of trees to either side of him were now appearing like a crowd at a parade of which he was the principle float, staggering down the path as they waved and cheered. This, for Mr Jones, was a clear sign that he was not well and that he should stop to rest despite the urgent errands he was to perform that morning.

Taking a seat on the nearest bench he took several gulps of air into his lungs and waited for his heart, still beating quickly from the brisk pace of his walk, to settle. His stomach was now burning with a stronger sensation than before, the muscles violently contracting and his digestive acids seemingly corroding

the first layer of flesh from his inner organs. Despite his discomfort and the fact that he was in such a hurry, all Mr Jones could now think about was eating. Hunger was like a small animal that had prised open his jaw, wriggled down his throat and was now resting in his lower intestine scratching away at his liver and gnawing at his spinal column. He knew though that there was nothing to eat.

He was alone on the path, surrounded by trees and delirious with a ravenous longing to tear something with his teeth, briefly chew it and swallow deeply. Becoming dizzy, Mr Jones looked around himself desperately for some food seeing only the trees, the bench and the grass on the floor below him. Almost slipping with nausea from where he was seated, and again cursing his missed breakfast and vitamin supplements, he suddenly came to the decision that if he were to survive this bout he would have to eat something quickly, the only palatable thing within his reach being the grass below. With the small amount of strength he could raise he threw himself from the bench and onto the floor, clawing at the grass and ramming the clutches into his mouth. At first he was relieved to have something in his mouth and even the dry soil attached to the roots and small stones provided him with little discomfort. However, after he had swallowed his second fistful of grass he realised his hunger had not been cured, in fact the sensation of swallowing the grass had made it worse.

The world around him was now spinning as he lay prostrate and dribbling on the ground. Mr Jones struggled to suck the last juices from the roots off his fingers and, as he did so, a new sensation had clawed its way to the front of his mind. The salt from the sweat on his hands had dripped into his mouth and was mixing with the blood from the cut beside his left molar. He began violently sucking on his fingers, attempting to absorb as much of the sweat into his tongue as possible and, when even his wrists began to taste only of his own saliva, he struggled to kick off his shoes and socks and begin on his toes. The crippling agony of his hunger would not stop. He felt a powerful longing to chew on his hands, to feel the texture of his own flesh between his teeth and began to grate his fingers so violently within his mouth that a sharp taste of blood struck his tongue, warming his chin as it dribbled from the cracks of his lips. Mr Jones began to bite large chunks of tissue from his wrists, ripping veins and muscle, grinding the moist boluses between his back teeth and feeling the contours of his oesophagus pulsating as they travelled to his stomach.

The agony of his wounds was drowned out by his hunger, his legs thrashing out in agony while his mind, completely unaware, continued to concentrate only on feasting. It was only after he had lost the use of his arms, having gnawed them both to the bone up to his elbows that he began on his feet. Being unable to grasp them with his now useless hands, Mr Jones frantically thrashed about on the ground until he was able to catch his right big toe within his teeth and continued to devour himself, repeating the procedure for the other leg. He had soon finished with his lower body and could now only resort to wriggling around while taking opportunistic bites from his shoulders and abdomen.

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He soon found that it was impossible to move at all, his neck having joined his arms and legs in being useless. The dull, regular hunger still hung within his torso like a clock pendulum, beating against the sides of his innards, yet he now had no choice but to remain still. Mr Jones could now see more clearly the twitching, raw flesh beneath his nose and beyond. He now again noticed the park. He noticed the bench, the grass, the trees that lay beside him and he even now saw the laces of the shoes he had flung aside not long before. He saw his legs, the scraps of his clothes that clung to the wet chunks of flesh hanging from his bones and just then, he remembered. A sharp agony struck Mr Jones as he began to lose consciousness. How would he now complete his errands that morning?

Miles Johnson, Edinburgh 2006

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