

Unrivaled Fortitude

Rob Peters

I was wearing a t-shirt that said ‘Sometimes I Build Walls Around Myself to Ward Off the Pain’ in a small cursive script, which was ironic because I was about to be put into a psych ward. At least it seemed imminent, anyway. The nurse told me if I was quiet and well-behaved I could just wait in the hospital bed and a doctor would eventually come examine me. But for some reason, being quiet was really hard that night. I’m normally a pretty quiet guy – almost to a fault – but that night I had realized I was Jesus and it was freaking me out.

I hadn’t slept in about five days and the first three were wonderful. Colours were brighter, smells richer, and girls prettier, even the plain ones. It was as if the bubble that had dulled my life experience until that point had suddenly burst, and wave upon wave of life – real, unfiltered life – kept lapping up against my newly sensitized brain. It all felt normal, like this was how life was supposed to be, and my previous understanding of consciousness was a cruel joke.

It wasn’t all as rosy as it might sound, however. The thick bubble that had encased me previously, though it rendered my life rather matte, also provided a sense of safety that was now gone. I would be standing in a coffee shop, for

example, and the realization that people were looking at me was positively frightening, like an unexpected punch to the stomach.

I was working at the border the night I wound up in the hospital. I felt completely on edge, my hair was probably a mess, and I couldn't understand why no one noticed anything different about me. Every conversation felt off, like I had a new sixth sense that enabled me to observe myself from afar. Now, instead of just listening to my co-workers tell me about the line-ups forming down the road, I was also conscious of how I was responding, like someone outside myself who saw how weird everyday workplace conversations really are.

It was my turn in the booth, so I went outside and told Kim she could have her break. I think that's when I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I knew, there was a family of tourists in a tan minivan honking at me and looking concerned. Even though Kim wears her hair feathered, with massive, poofy bangs, she is undeniably a good person, so I was relieved when she was the one to run out and find me. I told her I felt sick, and she very caringly said to go and tell the shift supervisor she would take over. So I did and went home with the flu. My boss, an idiot, didn't notice anything unusual.

I rode my mountain bike home and everything I thought about felt profound. It crossed my mind that I might be an artist, or a writer maybe, and that at any moment someone was going to discover me and tell me how talented I was. Hemingway seemed like an effeminate hack by comparison, even though I'd never written anything—it was just a given that I oozed literariness. So I decided I would start writing as soon as my thoughts slowed down a bit. It's not that hard, I reasoned; all I had to do was make normal experiences seem unfamiliar and write my sentences a little fancier.

I whizzed by a languid raccoon that made meaningful eye contact with me and it made me think about the deep mystery of the natural universe. Normally I would have just thought it was cute or something. All my thoughts were too fast and too grand and made me feel seasick, and all the spaces between my neurons were slowly flooding with fear.

When I got home I realized I was Jesus. It dawned on me slowly, while I was wide-awake in bed. I think the sleeplessness gave me access to all sorts of strange memories, and only ones that confirmed my status as the Son of God. All the good things I'd done in my life, admittedly not that long a list, were the only thoughts available to me, and as I pondered these, my rational mind must have arrived at the only conclusion possible: I was the Messiah. Duh.

That was the scariest moment of my life. To be honest, I wasn't sure if I could handle the stress of the position. Luckily my career as a deity lasted only a few minutes before it became unavoidably obvious that I was having a mental issue of some kind, so I called my parents, who, along with my sister and brother-in-law, took me to the hospital. This time I wasn't building walls around myself to ward off the pain. No, this time I was actually freaked out of my skull, but I wore the shirt anyway.

I must have talked about my writing career in the car because I distinctly remember my brother-in-law telling me that some artists are only recognized after they're dead. My sister chewed him out without actually saying anything by doing that thing that wives do with their eyes. I guess she was worried he might have been further inflating my ballooning ego. It was about to explode anyways, so I don't think the mention of posthumous fame actually did any harm. After that, all of us just quietly stared at Christmas lights whizzing by while my dad drove us to the hospital.

It was late at night when we arrived, and the emergency room with all the beds didn't have any lights on. The psych ward was full but I could spend the night in the emergency area if I was quiet, the nurse repeated, making deliberate eye contact with me. I realized I must have been talking too loud or too fast or

something, because all the staff wouldn't stop staring at me as if I was crazy. My dad looked so worried it broke my heart.

I settled into my bed and my sister and brother-in-law stayed with me. There was a sense of urgency growing inside me like a weed that threatens everything around it. Raw, unformed ideas kept spewing from my mouth like a volcano, creating an uncomfortable pressure to get all the words out. I think I started yelling, pleading with my sister to get me out of there, looking frantically into her fearful, watery eyes. I was sure all the sirens I kept hearing were coming for me.

At one point I started arguing with the nurse, who said if I didn't calm down she'd have to call security. My sister assured her in her most authoritative voice that I would be quiet, and once the nurse was gone, I made my sister and brother-in-law promise me the security men wouldn't come.

The exhilaration of the past five days was completely gone and replaced with fear and an uncomfortable sense of speed, and though to an observer I probably looked crazy, everything made perfect sense to me. That's what made the pressure all the worse: no one else got it, and it was excruciating to explain.

When the security men finally arrived, I noticed they were confused by my shirt. I had to be restrained while they pulled down my pants, inserted the

needle, and dragged me to the padded safety room. You promised, I yelled over and over as they were locking the door. I saw my brother-in-law crying and kicked the door until I fell asleep.