

FOUR SHORT NOVELS

by
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Remembrance of Things Past

EVENTUALLY IT CAME TO pass that no one ever had to die, unless they ran out of money. When you started to feel the little aches and twinges that meant your body was running down, you just got in line at Immortality, Incorporated, and handed them your credit card. As long as you had at least a million bucks – and eventually everybody did – they would reset you to whatever age you liked.

One way people made money was by swapping knowledge around. Skills could be transferred with a technology spun off from the immortality process. You could spend a few decades becoming a great concert pianist, and then put your ability up for sale. There was no shortage of people with two million dollars who would trade one million to be their village's Van Cliburn. In the sale of your ability, you would lose it, but you could buy it back a few decades or centuries later.

For many people this became the game of life – becoming temporarily a genius, selling your genius for youth, and then clawing your way up in some other field, to buy back the passion that had rescued you first from the grave. Enjoy it a few years, sell it again, and so on ad infinitum. Or finitum, if you just once made a wrong career move, and wound up old and poor and bereft of skill. That happened less and less often, of course, Darwinism inverted: the un-survival of the least fit.

It wasn't just a matter of swapping around your piano-playing and brain surgery, of course. People with the existential wherewithal to enjoy century after century of life tended to grow and improve with age. A person could look like a barely pubescent teenybopper, and yet be able to out-Socrates Socrates in the wisdom department. People were getting used to seeing acne and gravitas on the same face.

Enter Jutel Dicuth, the paragon of his age, a raging polymath. He could paint and sculpt and play six instruments. He could write formal poetry with his left hand while solving differential equations with his right. He could write formal poetry about differential equations! He was an Olympic-class gymnast and also held the world record for the javelin throw. He had earned doctorates in anthropology, art history, slipstream physics, and fly-tying.

He sold it all.

Immensely wealthy but bereft of any useful ability, Jutel Dicuth set up a trust fund for himself that would produce a million dollars every year. It also provided a generous salary for an attendant. He had Immortality, Incorporated set him back to the apparent age of one year, and keep resetting him once a year.

In a world where there were no children – where would you put them? – he was the only infant. He was the only person with no useful skills and, eventually, the only one alive who did not have nearly a thousand years of memory.

In a world that had outgrown the old religions – why would you need them? – he became like unto a god. People came from everywhere to listen to his random babbling and try to find a conduit to the state of blissful innocence buried under the weight of their wisdom.

It was inevitable that someone would see a profit in this. A consortium with a name we would translate as Blank Slate offered to "dicuth" anyone who had a certain large sum of what passed for money, and maintain them for as long as they wanted. At first people were slightly outraged, because it was a kind of sacrilege, or were slightly amused, because it was such a transparent scheme to gather what passed for wealth.

Sooner or later, though, everyone tried it. Most who tried it for one year went back for ten or a hundred, or, eventually, forever. After some centuries, permanent dicuths began to outnumber humans – though those humans were not anything you would recognize as people, crushed as they were by nearly a thousand years of wisdom and experience. And jealous of those who had given up.

On 31 December, A.D. 3000, the last "normal" person surrendered his loneliness for dicuth bliss. The world was populated completely by total innocents, tended by patient machines.

It lasted a long time. Then one by one, the machines broke down.

Crime and Punishment

EVENTUALLY IT CAME TO PASS that no one ever had to die, unless they were so horrible that society had to dispose of them. Other than the occasional horrible person, the world was in an

idyllic state, everyone living as long as they wanted to, doing what they wanted to do.

This is how things got back to normal.

People gained immortality by making copies of themselves, farlies, which were kept in safe places and updated periodically. So if you got run over by a truck or hit by a meteorite, your farlie would sense this and automatically pop out and take over, after prudently making a farlie of itself. Upon that temporary death, you would lose only the weeks or months that had gone by since your last update.

That made it difficult to deal with criminals. If someone was so horrible that society had to hang or shoot or electrocute or inject him to death, his farlie would crop up somewhere, still bad to the bone, make a farlie of itself, and go off on another rampage. If you put him in jail for the rest of his life, he would eventually die, but then his evil farlie would leap out, full of youthful vigor and nasty intent.

Ultimately, if society felt you were too horrible to live, it would take preemptive action: check out your farlie and destroy it first. If it could be found. Really bad people became adept at hiding their farlies. Inevitably, people who were really good at being really bad became master criminals. It was that, or die forever. There were only a few dozen of them, but they moved through the world like neutrinos: effortless, unstoppable, invisible.

One of them was a man named Bad Billy Beerbreath. He started the ultimate crime wave.

There were Farlie Centers where you would go to update your farlie – one hundred of them, all over the world – and that's where almost everybody kept their farlies stored. But you could actually put a farlie anywhere, if you got together enough liquid nitrogen and terabytes of storage and kept them in a cool dry place out of direct sunlight.

Most people didn't know this; in fact, it was forbidden knowledge. Nobody knew how to make Farlie Centers anymore, either. They were all built during the lifetime of Joao Farlie, who had wandered off with the blueprints after deciding not to make a copy of himself, himself.

Bad Billy Beerbreath decided to make it his business to trash Farlie Centers. In its way, this was worse than murder, because if a client died before he or she found out about it, and hadn't been able to make a new farlie (which took weeks) – he or she would die for real, kaput, out of the picture. It was a crime beyond crime. Just thinking about this gave Bad Billy an acute pleasure akin to a hundred orgasms.

Because there were a hundred Bad Billy Beerbreaths.

In preparation for his crime wave, Bad Billy had spent years making a hundred farlies of himself, and he stored them in cool dry places out of direct sunlight, all around the world. On 13 May 2999, all but one of those farlies jump-started itself and went out to destroy the nearest Farlie Center.

By noon, GMT, police and militia all over the world had captured or killed or subdued every copy (but one) of Bad Billy, but by noon every single Farlie Center in the world had been leveled, save the one in Akron, Ohio.

The only people left who had farlies were people who had a reason to keep them in a secret place. Master criminals like Billy. Pals of Billy. They all were waiting at Akron, and held off the authorities for months, by making farlie after farlie of themselves, like broomsticks in a Disney cartoon, sending most of them out to die, or "die," defending the place, until there were so many of them the walls were bulging. Then they sent out word that they wanted to negotiate, and during the lull that promise produced, they fled en masse, destroying the last Farlie Center behind them.

They were a powerful force, a hundred thousand hardened criminals united in their contempt for people like you and me, and in their loyalty to Bad Billy Beerbreath. Somewhat giddy, not to say insane, in their triumph after having destroyed every Farlie Center, they went on to destroy every jail and prison and courthouse. That did cut their numbers down considerably, since most of them only had ten or twenty farlies tucked away, but it also reduced drastically the number of police, not to mention the number of people willing to take up policing as a profession, since once somebody killed you twice, you had to stay dead.

By New Year's Eve, A.D. 3000, the criminals were in charge of the whole world.

Again.

War and Peace

EVENTUALLY IT CAME TO PASS that no one ever had to die, unless they wanted to, or could be talked into it. That made it very hard to fight wars, and a larger and larger part of every nation's military budget was given over to psychological operations directed toward their own

people: dulce et decorum est just wasn't convincing enough anymore.

There were two elements to this sales job. One was to romanticize the image of the soldier as heroic defender of the blah blah blah. That was not too hard; they'd been doing that since Homer. The other was more subtle: convince people that every individual life was essentially worthless -- your own and also the lives of the people you would eventually be killing.

That was a hard job, but the science of advertising, more than a millennium after Madison Avenue, was equal to it, through the person of a genius named Manny O'Malley. The pitch was subtle, and hard for a person to understand who hasn't lived for centuries, but shorn of Manny's incomprehensible humor and appeal to subtle pleasures that had no name until the thirtieth century, it boiled down to this:

A thousand years ago, they seduced people into soldiering with the slogan, "Be all that you can be." But you have been all you can be. The only thing left worth being is not being.

Everybody else is in the same boat, O'Malley convinced them. In the process of giving yourself the precious gift of nonexistence, share it with many others.

It's hard for us to understand. But then we would be hard for them to understand, with all this remorseless getting and spending laying waste our years.

Wars were all fought in Death Valley, with primitive hand weapons, and the United States grew wealthy renting the place out, until it inevitably found itself fighting a series of wars for Death Valley, during one of which O'Malley himself finally died, charging a phalanx of no-longer-immortal pikemen on his robotic horse, waving a broken sword. His final words were, famously, "Oh, shit."

Death Valley eventually wound up in the hands of the Bertelsmann Corporation, which ultimately ruled the world. But by that time, Manny's advertising had been so effective that no one cared. Everybody was in uniform, lining up to do their bit for Bertelsmann.

Even the advertising scientists. Even the high management of Bertelsmann.

There was a worldwide referendum, utilizing something indistinguishable from telepathy, where everybody agreed to change the name of the planet to Death Valley, and on the eve of the new century, A.D. 3000, have at each other.

Thus O'Malley's ultimate ad campaign achieved the ultimate victory: a world that consumed itself.

The Way of All Flesh

EVENTUALLY IT CAME TO PASS that no one ever had to die, so long as just one person loved them. The process that provided immortality was fueled that way.

Almost everybody can find someone to love him or her, at least for a little while, and if and when that someone says good-bye, most people can clean up their act enough to find yet another.

But every now and then you find a specimen who is so unlovable that he can't even get a hungry dog to take a biscuit from his hand. Babies take one look at him and get the colic. Women cross their legs as he passes by. Ardent homosexuals drop their collective gaze. Old people desperate for company feign sleep.

The most extreme such specimen was Custer Tralia. Custer came out of the womb with teeth, and bit the doctor. In grade school he broke up the love training sessions with highly toxic farts. He celebrated puberty by not washing for a year. All through middle school and high school, he made loving couples into enemies by spreading clever vicious lies. He formed a Masturbation Club and didn't allow anybody else to join. In his graduation yearbook, he was unanimously voted "The One Least Likely to Survive, If We Have Anything to Do with It."

In college, he became truly reckless. When everybody else was feeling the first whiff of mortality and frantically seducing in self-defense, Custer declared that he hated women almost as much as he hated men, and he reveled in his freedom from love; his superior detachment from the cloying crowd. Death was nothing compared to the hell of dependency. When, at the beginning of his junior year, he had to declare what his profession was going to be, he wrote down "hermit" for first, second, and third choices.

The world was getting pretty damned crowded, though, since a lot of people loved each other so much they turned out copy after copy of themselves. The only place Custer could go and be truly alone was the Australian outback. He had a helicopter drop him there with a big water tank and crates of food. They said they'd check back in a year, and Custer said don't bother. If you've decided not to live forever, a few years or decades one way or the other don't make much difference.

He found peace among the wallabies and dingoes. A kangaroo began to follow him around, and he

accepted it as a pet, sharing his rehydrated Kentucky Fried Chicken and fish and chips with it.

Life was a pleasantly sterile and objectless quest. Custer and his kangaroo quartered the outback, turning over rocks just to bother the things underneath. The kangaroo was loyal, which was a liability, but at least it couldn't talk, and its attachment to Custer was transparently selfish, so they got along. He taught it how to beg, and, by not rewarding it, taught it how to whimper.

One day, like Robinson Crusoe, he found footprints. Unlike Robinson Crusoe, he hastened in the opposite direction.

But the footprinter had been watching him for some time, and outsmarted him. Knowing he would be gone all day, she had started miles away, walking backward by his camp, and knew that his instinct for hermitage would lead him directly, perversely, back into her cave.

Parky Gumma had decided to become a hermit, too, after she read about Custer's audacious gesture. But after about a year she wanted a bath, and someone to love her so she wouldn't die, in that order. So under the wheeling Milky Way, on the eve of the thirty-first century, she stalked backward to her cave, and squandered a month's worth of water sluicing her body, which was unremarkable except for the fact that it was clean and the only female one in two hundred thousand square miles.

Parky left herself unclothed and squeaky clean, carefully perched on a camp stool, waiting for Custer's curiosity and misanthropy to lead him back to her keep. He crept in a couple of hours after sunrise.

She stood up and spread her arms, and his pet kangaroo boinged away in terror.

Custer himself was paralyzed by a mixture of conflicting impulses. He had seen pictures of naked women, but never one actually in the flesh, and honestly didn't know what to do.

Parky showed him.

The rest is the unmaking of history. That Parky had admired him and followed him into the desert was even more endearing than the slip and slide that she demonstrated for him after she washed him up. But that was revolutionary, too. Custer had to admit that a year or a century or a millennium of that would be better than keeling over and having dingos tear up your corpse and spread your bones over the uncaring sands.

So this is Custer's story, and ours. He never did get around to liking baths, so you couldn't say that love conquers all. But it could still conquer death.