

Thee Inevitable Shrug

Later, after he finally realized he was powerless to stop it, Larry accepted the inevitability of his decline and ultimate demise. For the time being, however, Larry was sick for no reason. Again.

“We have no fucking idea what's wrong with you,” his doctor declared. The 'fucking' was new, the diagnoses – or lack thereof – was not. Larry had been coming to Dr. Wilson since this 'condition' of his started, and Dr. Wilson had run tests, taken blood, stuck his finger up Larry's ass (more than once), and changed Larry's diet (hello, kale!) and nothing had changed. Larry still got sick. Vomiting, fevers, rash...sick. Every fall, consistently, and other times of the year, randomly.

“Should I see a fucking specialist?” Larry figured the situation called for some *fucking* urgency, since the doctor had used the word, so Larry joined in. Fucking yes. Fu. King. Yes.

Doctor Wilson looked away; his office was as sterile as you'd expect a doctor's office to be. Neutral wallpaper on the walls, neutral flooring, neutral colored chairs. Larry thought it'd be more fun to go to a punk rock doctor; at the least the décor would entertain.

“I made an appointment for you at an allergist I know,” Doctor Wilson said coldly to the wall. Larry thought the back of his head looked like the back of a doctor's head – neutral.

“But what?”

Doctor Wilson turned his head to one side, like a guilty man does. “How did you know there was a *but*?”

“You told the wall it had an appointment, when that was meant for me. That means there's a *but*.”

Doctor Wilson sighed. Guilty as charged, Larry thought. “Well -” Doctor Wilson looked up at Larry - “you can't get in to see him for 3 months.”

Larry sneezed. Yellow phlegm flew onto his hand like highway roadkill onto a windshield. Fuckin' doctors.

“Fuckin' doctors,” Larry said, wiping his hand on a neutral paper towel.

“I'm sorry, Larry.” Doctor Wilson went over to his neutral sink and started washing his neutral hands. “There's really nothing more I can do – you need to get a second opinion.”

“Do you ever figure out what's wrong with your patients? Or is a second opinion your diagnoses every fucking time? Seriously.”

“Larry, I have a clientele that has everything from MS to cancer to the runs. You are the only client – *the only one* - that I've been unable to correctly diagnose.”

“Lucky me.”

“Lucky you. Have you -” The doctor turned to face Larry and Larry realized the doctor had had a pastrami sandwich for lunch. If he were a dentist, Larry would have walked out because dentists should brush their teeth after lunch, if not for their hygiene – which was a good reason anyway – but also as a good testimonial for their business. “Have you considered marijuana?”

Considered marijuana? Larry looked at the doctor with a closed nose – he didn't like pastrami much - and skeptical eyes; was this really happening? Larry had always considered the whole medical marijuana movement to be a bit of a joke; in his eyes, the stoners had pulled a fast one on the general public and somehow made it legal to get high. Medicinal, my ass, Larry thought.

“Really, Doctor Wilson?”

“Really, Larry. It helps some people, maybe it can help you.”

Larry rolled his eyes up to the ceiling and back down again. This was crazy. He sneezed.

“And you can write me a prescription?”

“I can.”

Larry closed one eye because it was watering. Then he closed the other one so he could focus. Marijuana. Pot. Mary Jane. Herb. Hippies. Jam bands. Sandals. Tie Dyes. He realized he was thinking completely in stereotypes and sneezed again, harder than last time. What the hell.

“Can't hurt, right? I'll have to pull out my old Grateful Dead tapes to enhance my recovery, but what the hell.”

Doctor Wilson reached into a cabinet and pulled out a green prescription pad. Green. Larry rolled his watery eyes; marijuana advocates got into everything, even the accessories. Doctor Wilson scribbled on the pad, ripped the top sheet off, and handed it to Larry. “Here you go. 1 ounce of cannabis each week for 2 months, refillable for a year.”

“Wow. Isn't that a lot?”

“It is. You might need a lot.”

“Thanks.”

“Let's hope it works, Larry.”

“Let's hope, doc. Oh, and how was the pastrami?”

But it didn't work. Larry went to his local medical marijuana dispensary, housed in a former childcare facility – the childcare facility was forced out when the dispensary bought the building because childcare and marijuana somehow can't be within one thousand feet of each other, according to local law - and picked up some Purple Haze and some Accidental Tourist. Mostly because he thought Jimi Hendrix probably smoked Purple Haze (and Jimi Hendrix seemed like a cool guy when he was stoned, based on various Jimi Hendrix bootleg rehearsal tapes that Larry owned) and because he felt very much like an accidental tourist in his own sick life. Here it was, fall, and here Larry was, sick again. No explanation, no reason, no discernible logic...an accidental tourist in a fucked up repetitive scenario. Kinda like Billy Murray in “Groundhog Day,” only less funny and without Andi MacDowell as a love interest to at least give him direction. Ah, well, Larry thought, at least there was a marijuana strain named in honor of his fucked up repetitive scenario.

He got home to his condo and pulled his car into the garage, because he wasn't totally sure that walking from the street to his condo with a bag of weed was legal, no matter how cool the weed was. Was the sidewalk medicinal territory? Larry wasn't sure, so to be safe, he parked his 2010 Subaru in the garage below his condo building. It was the Cleanest Subaru On The Planet, because Larry kept it that way...just in case he was allergic to it. But he kept it clean year round, and Larry got sick at random times, so he had eliminated the Subaru as a possible cause of his illnesses. Still, he kept it clean, out of habit.

And his condo? Clean. And as sterile as a doctor's office. Noticing this today, for the first time, made Larry feel something he decided was sadness mixed with inevitability. He had gone through his condo when he bought it and eliminated all possible sources of allergens, so the place was as clean as a hospital and as sparsely furnished. It suited Larry fine and, after early mentally accusing the doctor of being boring, style wise, Larry realized he wasn't any better. Here he was, with linoleum floors, white walls, and boring-ass furniture. Larry sighed, rolled a joint, and looked for a lighter. And, as soon as he found it and lit the joint, he barfed.

Larry *had* had a love interest at one point; a girlfriend, even. He and Esperanza met in college in a literature class his junior year and instantly hit it off. Larry begrudgingly had to take the literature class as a compulsory general education requirement of his engineering curriculum, while Esperanza

was an English major and took the class simply because she loved literature. She was also insightful and a quick wit, so their relationship started with Esperanza deriding Larry in class over his obvious disinterest in even being there. Engineering students in literature classes usually have obvious disinterest; it's part of the human condition. But then a funny thing happened; Esperanza's mocking of Larry motivated him to pay attention to the subject matter and he found himself falling in love...with both literature and Esperanza.

After college, he and Esperanza did the things young people in love did; they traveled to Europe, met each other's families, entered into careers, and shacked up together in a suburb of a coastal American city. And Larry started to get sick. The first time he got sick was shortly after he and Esperanza decided, on a lazy whim, to drive through the fast-food burger place near their home and grab some late-night grub. It wasn't the first time they'd been there, but it was the first time in a long time, because both he and Esperanza were conscientious of their health and both he and Esperanza believed fast food was about the worst thing a person could do for their health. Still, it was late, they'd just seen a concert at the university and had a couple of beers, and a greasy burger before bed sounded good to both of them.

It wasn't. Well, it was good for Esperanza, but that night Larry adopted a new religion, one that has a porcelain God. And he prayed to the porcelain God several times that night. Which should really earn him some favor with the God, Larry thought, but life doesn't always work that way. And Larry's life never worked that way.

Things went downhill from the introduction of his new God for Larry. Not quickly downhill, but slowly and steadily, like a tortoise ambling down the side of a mountain towards his certain fiery doom. Every once in a while he'd get a rash or a headache or pinkeye or a runny nose or dizziness or swollen glands or just flat-out fatigue, and he'd have to take a day or two off of work and lay in his room until the feelings passed or until he barfed it all out. Eventually, the engineering firm he worked at got tired of Larry taking off 20, then 30, then 40 days a year and gave him disability and sent him home for 365 days a year.

So Larry saw doctors. Lots and lots of doctors. And Larry saw specialists. Lots and lots of specialists. Larry even saw dentists, because one doctor put forth the crackpot theory that his gums could be infected, causing his body to react inappropriately. That's the word the doctor used, "Inappropriately." Larry had absorbed some of Esperanza's quick wit and had his own sarcastic soul,

so he immediately took that particular doctor to task.

“Inappropriately?”

“That means your body is reacting to something in a way that -”

“I know what it fucking means, doctor.”

“Now, Larry -”

“Is 'inappropriate' all this is, doctor? When my eyes swell shut while I'm sitting in traffic and I can't see, that's 'inappropriate?' When I vomit up half of my intestines while watching television with my girlfriend, that's 'inappropriate?' Is shitting my pants at the movies 'inappropriate?’”

“We all agree you have a special condition, Larry.”

“Special? Should I join the Special Olympics, doc? Maybe race in the 'Shit Your Pants Hurdles?' Huh?”

“Larry -”

“Fuck this. I'm leaving.” Larry barfed on the doctor's sterile white countertop – involuntarily, although you might assume otherwise, given his mood - grabbed his coat, and walked out the door.

Eventually, Esperanza got tired of Larry shitting his pants whenever they went to a movie and left him. This would have made the old Larry overwhelmingly mournful, but the new Larry was so busy cleaning puss out of his eyes that he didn't have the will nor the energy to mourn.

Larry had MRI's, CAT scans, X-Rays...even a prostate exam, just in case (despite the fact that Larry wasn't really old enough for a prostate exam yet, under normal circumstances). Larry loved the fact that he had a man's finger up his ass, 'just in case.' The absurdity of it all didn't escape him, and his face broke out in hives, a fact that he noticed in Doctor Wilson's neutral office mirror.

“Thanks, Doctor Wilson.”

“Most people don't thank me for a prostate exam, Larry.”

“I'm not. I'm thanking you for the hives.”

“Jesus, Larry, did those just appear?”

“Yep.”

“While I had my finger up your ass?”

“Yes. And thank you for being so eloquent about it.”

“I was going to say, 'Please to meet you,' Larry.”

“That's funny, because I was going to say, 'shouldn't you really buy me dinner first?' But then my face broke out in hives and the punchline became secondary to the fact that my FUCKING FACE LOOKS LIKE THE SURFACE OF THE MOON!”

“Now, Larry, this really isn't bad.”

“No, doc?”

“No, Larry. At least you're not shitting yourself today.”

“You really are a fucking asshole, Doctor Wilson, you know that?” Larry really didn't mean what he just said, but he figured he and the doc now shared an intimacy that allowed deep sarcasm. And name calling. It was like elementary school all over again...except for the finger up the ass part.

“Look, Larry, you're a special case and I have no idea what's going on with you. The specialists have no idea what's going on with you. Your girlfriend has no idea what's going on with you.”

“She left. Since you brought her up and all. Asshole.”

“I'm sorry, Larry. The point is -”

“I know what the point is. I'm special.” Larry drew out the long 'e' sound in the word so that the intended sarcasm could not be misinterpreted. Even by a doctor.

“Larry, let's start over.”

“How, doc? You already stuck your finger up my ass; I think we're beyond first dates. At this point we should probably write a pre-nup. I'll only want half.” Larry crossed his fingers so the doctor could see that he had done so. “*I promise.*”

The doctor didn't laugh or smile; instead, he looked Larry deep in his eye. “When was the first time you got sick?”

“Fast food, with my girlfriend – my ex-girlfriend now - spent the evening puking my guts out. We've been over this. You got anything else?”

“And when else do you get sick?”

“When I'm at the movies, when I watch TV, when I listen to certain types of music.”

“Have you tracked it?”

“Tracked it?”

“I mean, like written it down? When exactly you get sick? What exactly you were doing when you got sick?”

“No.” Larry kind of knew all times he got sick, because he lived them, but he had never actually written them down. Odd, considering he was an engineer and quite attentive to detail.

Generally. "I mean, a little, but not completely."

"Start tracking it. And here -" Doctor Wilson handed Larry a business card - "Here's a guy I want you to call. Lives by the beach. Surfs all day. Practices a form of, shall we say, holistic medicine."

"A form of?"

"His methods are not typical, even for a quack holistic guy. But I gotta be honest; I'm out of ideas. Modern medicine may not be able to help you."

"But some crazy surfer dude can?"

The doctor shook his head and raised his eyebrows, much like a parent wondering where the fuck his kid got the great idea to create art on the wall with spaghetti and meatballs. "It's worth a shot, Larry. You have nothing else to lose....and everything to gain." Doctor Wilson put his hand on Larry's shoulder. "Good luck."

"Everytime I come to you, I feel less and less like I have any luck at all," Larry replied, and walked out the door.

On the way home, Larry saw the local church and thought, 'maybe a little bit of religion will help me.' He parked his car, walked in the front door, and promptly sneezed yellow phlegm all over the church floor.

Larry went home and laid on his Eames chair in his library. It was truly a library; hundreds of books lined its shelves and art hung from its walls, in the few places without shelves. Esperanza and Larry had built this library before she had left, and it was truly the only place in the world Larry had any confidence that he would not feel sick. In fact, it was the only place in the world Larry had any confidence that he would feel good. No shitting of his pants here.

He closed his eyes and talked to himself; it was something he did in quiet moments. Larry, he said, none of your fucking doctors have been able to figure out what's wrong with you; none of the specialists have been able to figure out what's wrong with you; even God can't help. Maybe it is time to call a quack. By quack, he said to himself, I don't mean duck. Larry chuckled. Don't laugh at me, Larry said to himself, I'm serious. Sorry, Larry said, that was funny. Yeah, all right, Larry said, I guess it was. Where the fuck was I? I don't know, Larry said, where the fuck were you? Oh, I remember, I was in your mom! Hahahaha, Larry said, you're an asshole. Takes one to know one, Larry said. At

least I didn't have my finger in one today, Larry said. Larry laughed at his own joke and decided that yeah, it was time to get jiggy with it. Throw regular bullshit medicine out the window and call the holistic beach bum. Nothing else worked, right? And he already knew the punchlines to all the jokes he was telling himself, so maybe he should try to talk to somebody else. Again.

The phone conversation with Jimmy, Mister Holistic Righteous Dude, went something like this:

“Yo, this is Jimmy.”

“Jimmy, this is Larry. Doctor Wilson told me to call.”

“Dude, I've been waiting for you to call.”

“You have?”

“Yeah. He told me you'd be calling, dude. He told me a bit about your problems.”

“Yeah?”

“Shitting your pants in public is not to be taken lightly, brother.”

Larry almost hung up the phone, but something in Jimmy's voice when he called Larry 'brother' made him stay on the line. “No, uh, no it isn't.”

“Have you been tracking your episodes?”

“Episodes? No. But I can start, I guess.”

“You need to start. You need about 6 months worth of data before we can even begin.”

“Oh.”

“Start tracking it, brother, and call me back in six months.”

“I have to wait six months?”

“It's the only way. Brother.”

So Larry made a spreadsheet. And on this spreadsheet, he had the following columns: Date of sickness, Time of day of sickness, Type of sickness, Activities prior to getting sick. And for six months, he wrote down every time he got sick. Every time he sneezed, every time he barfed, every time he shit his pants. He was pretty religious about it – ironically, this type of religion didn't make him sick – because A) had no girlfriend and no job, so he had the time, and B) he had exhausted just about every other idea, even going so far as to have a man's finger up his ass, so what could this hurt? Seriously. His rectum thought it was a good idea, at least.

Six months to the day after beginning his Barf Tracker 2000 Spreadsheet – Larry's name for it;

everything sounds formidable with the number 2000 after it – he drove down to Doctor Jimmy's house near the beach and double parked. He figured if Doctor Jimmy couldn't help him, Larry might just say fuck it, walk out into the surf and disappear...and then he wouldn't need a car anyway. So somebody else could have his car, if they could get it out of impound.

He left his keys in the ignition, grabbed his neatly printed out Barf Tracker 2000 Spreadsheet – Larry could make a motherfuckin' spreadsheet, yo – and a notebook and walked across the road to Doctor Jimmy's house, which was more like a shack than anything. A very unpretentious beach shack, with a surfboard over the door and a welcome mat that simply said, “Dude!” Really, Larry thought. This was my savior? No other doctor or specialist or God or girlfriend could help me but Doctor Dude could? Larry shook his head; I asked for a quack, and I got one, he said to himself. This was going to go nowhere. I should take my motherfuckin' spreadsheet and go home.

He turned to walk away just as the door opened. A shirtless man in his early 30s opened the door and said, “Dude, I was expecting you. Come on in.”

Larry, being the intrinsically non-confrontational person that he was, didn't want to offend the Quack Dude Doctor, so he looked for reasons to stay. I have nothing to lose and nothing to go home to, so fuck it, he thought. He crossed the 'Dude!' welcome mat and entered Doctor Jimmy's house.

“Um, Thanks for seeing me, Doctor Jimmy.”

“Call me Mister.”

“Mister Jimmy.”

“Just kidding, dude. Call me Jimmy. I'm not a doctor. Not anymore.”

“Jimmy.”

“Have a seat.” Larry found a chair and sat in it; it was the most comfortable chair he had ever sat in. Larry thought he needed one at his own home. “Do you have the spreadsheet?”

“Sure.” Larry handed Jimmy the spreadsheet. “You're not a doctor anymore?”

Jimmy looked the spreadsheet over. “Nope. I was, but dealing with the insurance aspects of it made me sick.”

“Yeah, that can make anybody sick.” Larry knew a lot about dealing with health insurance companies; he had pretty much redefined the terms 'undefined debilitating illness' for his own health insurance carrier. And he had taken to calling deductibles 'defucktibles.'

“Literally.”

“Oh.”

An uncomfortable silence settled over the room as Jimmy looked the spreadsheet over. His face, as he reviewed the numbers, dates, and illnesses, told a story, Larry thought. It was the story of one fucked-up man's life, riddled with undefined debilitating illnesses, loss, defucktibles, and frustration. Until the narrative took a right turn.

“Well, I know what's wrong with you,” Jimmy spoke as he looked up from his wicker chair at Larry.

“Yeah, nobody ever does – wait, what?” Larry sat, incredulous at what he thought he'd just heard. Nobody had ever spoken those exact words in that exact order to him before and he had a little trouble comprehending them in that exact order.

“I know what's wrong with you. Would you like a drink?”

It was the middle of the day and Larry had to drive home; having a drink right now would be stupid. Larry sneezed.

“No, thanks.”

“You just proved it.”

“Proved what?”

“My diagnoses.”

“Which is?”

“You're allergic.”

Great, Larry thought. This quack of a doctor thinks I have a simple allergy to something. Little does he know I've taken every allergy test available and nothing's ever come up positive. This is bullshit. Larry got up to leave.

“Sit down.”

“I'm not allergic to anything, Doctor Jimmy. Or however you like to be addressed. I have taken every allergy test available, in every form available, and nothing has ever come up positive. I am not allergic.”

“Yes, you are. It's all right here in your 'Barf Tracker 2000' spreadsheet.”

“What is?”

“Look at it, Larry.” Jimmy passed a page of the spreadsheet to Larry. “You shit your pants whenever you go to a Hollywood blockbuster. You puke whenever you hear a politician speak. Your eyes swell shut whenever you get stuck in traffic.”

“Yeah, so?”

“You're allergic, Larry. You're allergic...to stupidity.”

“Say it again?”

“Stupidity. The stupidity of your life. Reality television, social media, bad grammar....they all make you sick. And they're all stupid.”

Larry looked intently at Doctor Jimmy; he wasn't kidding. Larry thought for a moment; surely this was ridiculous. And stupid. But Larry felt fine. “How come I'm not sick right now then, Doc...ur, Jimmy?”

“Because I'm right. And there's nothing stupid about being right about the human condition.”

Holy crap, Larry thought, that's quite a theory. Allergic to stupidity. He wondered A) if this was even possible, and B) if it was possible, had anybody had ever had this condition before.

“I know what you're thinking,” Jimmy said. “I have the same condition; it's what killed my medical career. Remember, dealing with insurance companies? I used to shit my pants every time a patient contacted me about a denied claim; that got messy. That's why I now live here by the beach without a television or a car; there's nothing stupid about finding peace in your way, Larry. And, dare I say, there's nothing stupid about surfing every day of your life. And there's nothing stupid about calling people 'dude.’”

“This is insane.”

“Yes it is, Larry. But it's also true. I have not been sick since the last presidential election. I wasn't even paying attention to it, but stupidity seeps. Be aware of that.”

Larry looked at Jimmy intently for a moment; surely this was insane.

“This is insane.”

“Where you do feel the best, Larry?”

“In my study. At home.”

“And what's in your study, Larry? Is there a television?”

“No. Just books and art.”

“Bingo.”

“There's no bingo in my study.”

“Book and art, Larry. Books and art. Those are not stupid things. Some of the books might be poorly written or have no discernible plot and some of the art might not be Picasso, but there are no stupid books or art. Look around.” Doctor Jimmy looked up at the walls of his beach shack; Larry did too. Books and art everywhere. And musical instruments. And on the floor, very comfortable chairs.

“So, wait, you used to get sick?” Larry had to revisit this, to get his head around it. He felt like he was back in college and his calculus professor had just put a differential equation up on the chalkboard and asked Larry to solve it. It was a similar clusterfuck.

“Used to, all the time.”

“And then -?”

“And then I moved here and got rid of a lot of things. Televisions, credit cards, my car, the internet, my smart phone, uncomfortable chairs, processed foods...”

“And you felt better?”

“I stopped shitting my pants in public, if that's what you're asking.”

“Well, that's certainly part of it.”

“The rashes, the croup, the itchy asshole, the swollen glands...all of it stopped. All of it. Unless there's an election or, sometimes, the start of a new fall TV season, I generally feel very good. Some things you just can't avoid.”

Larry looked around again; the ex-doctor sure seemed to be doing all right. Could any of this be true? Or was living at the beach good for everybody?

“I just don't know, doc.”

“I'm not a doctor.”

“Whatever. I need some time to think this over.”

“Go ahead, dude. You'll eventually come to the same conclusion I did. Especially if you keep tracking your episodes.”

Larry got up to leave. “Do I owe you any money for today?”

Jimmy got up and extended his hand for Larry to shake. “Charging to help a fellow human being find peace in his life? That would be stupid.”

They shook hands and Larry left.

His car was still double parked in front of Jimmy's house, with the keys still in it...but it had 2 parking tickets on the windshield. Larry threw up a little in his mouth. Were parking tickets stupid? Yes, Larry thought, yes they are. Hmm...

Larry went back to his condo and decided to run his own tests. He had to know the truth, had to, but this wasn't it. Was it? Allergic to stupidity? That was stupid...but Larry felt fine. Dammit.

He had a television on his living room wall but he hadn't turned it on in months. He would start there. He found the remote and turned the television on; it was on PBS. Larry watched for a few minutes and felt nothing.

Time to turn it up; he changed the channel to one of those Celebrity News shows, where all they talk about is celebrities. Who's banging who, who has a new boob job, who's in rehab.

Larry promptly puked all over the floor and quickly turned the TV off. This theory simply can't be true, he thought. There are so many stupid things. Fast food, crappy music, formulaic movies, the cult of celebrity; all parts of today's society...and all things that made Larry sick. How the fuck, he wondered, do you get away from stupidity in this modern world? Jimmy's voice echoed in his head; "Sell everything and move to the beach, dude." The beach. Surely there were stupid things at the beach, right? Rip tides? Sting rays? Grunion? Yes, grunion were stupid. That was true.

Was it? Larry went into his library and pulled out the G book from the Encyclopedia Britannica. He used to look things up on Wikipedia, but surfing the web gave him a strange rash on his armpits, so he stopped doing that and bought the last year set of Encyclopedia Britannica in 2010. It came in handy; he liked to think of it as an old skool Google. Skoogle, he called it. And there, on page 249, 'Grunion.' Good for nothing. Stupid.

So Jimmy was wrong. Right? Larry wasn't sure. 32 nights out of the year the grunion ran; did Larry get sick 32 times a year? Or did he just avoid the beach those nights?

This was insane, Larry thought. He couldn't believe he was even following this train of thought this far down the rabbit hole. People weren't allergic to stupidity, that was stupid. And insane. Allergy, by the strictest definition of the word....Larry pulled out the 'A' volume of the encyclopedia. Allergins, according to Larry's 2010 encyclopedia, did not include human behavior. Nor did they include judgments. And wasn't stupidity just a judgment, an opinion? If something was stupid, wasn't that only because the beholder thought it was stupid? Larry thought reality TV was stupid but a lot of people like it, apparently. Stupidity is totally subjective, Larry thought, which makes this whole theory complete bullshit. You can't be allergic to something that is somebody's opinion. That would mean you could cure your own allergies by changing your opinions.

Larry sat in his chair in his library and looked around. He had always felt comfortable and happy here; surrounded by books and art, Larry always thought these were things that made him happy. Maybe, just maybe, he thought, they were the few things in his life that weren't stupid.

Okay, Larry thought, you're this far down the rabbit hole and yet you doubt its existence. It

reminded him a little of calculus class in college; the professor would fill up half of the chalkboard with numbers and whatnot and then turn to the class and ask, “Well, shall we finish it?” Of course we should finish it, prof, we're more than halfway there, according to my crude calculations. Granted, it often took the remainder of the chalkboard and the class time, but once you start figuring out the velocity of a fluid being discharged from a cylindrical cylinder on a train going 50 mph towards Atlanta, you finish figuring out the velocity of a fluid being discharged from a cylindrical cylinder on a train going 50 mph towards Atlanta. It was an ethical thing. Finish something or don't start it at all, no matter how much of a clusterfuck it started out as.

And Larry thought it was time to finish this. To find out if this rabbit hole existed at all. To kill the clusterfuck.

He made a list on page 2 of what was now a multi-page Barf Tracker 2000 spreadsheet; Larry was efficient like that. No reason to start a brand new spreadsheet, just make the list in the same spreadsheet. The title of this list was quite simple: “Things That Are Stupid.” And the items listed in column 1 were as follows:

- Network television.
- Office drones.
- People who eat themselves into a coma.
- Popular music/literature/movies.
- Sports fans.
- Politicians and elections.
- People who believe politicians.
- Closed minds.
- Popular music.
- Traffic.
- Drugs.
- Ignorance.
- Hate/racism.
- Bad grammar.
- Social Media.
- Wal-Mart.
- Comb-overs.
- Fast food.

Larry looked the list over. Yep, everything on here was stupid. And, more importantly, everything on this list was associated with at least one episode of sickness in Larry's life. Everything but one.

Wal-Mart.

Larry hadn't actually ever been into a Wal-Mart; Esperanza had convinced him of the value of shopping locally and small, so the idea of going to a big-box store where everything is made in China never appealed to him. And, really, Larry thought, Wal-Mart might be the stupidest thing on this list. Sure, ignorance is stupid, but aren't people who shop at Wal-Mart inherently stupid, doubling down on the stupidity? Hell, squaring up on the stupidity.

Yes.

Wal-Mart.

Sure, Larry thought, the low, low prices were attractive. But is Wal-Mart really more stupid than a comb-over? Larry once saw a guy who had a comb-over that looked like a helmet; Larry developed a rash the next day but he laughed about it anyway. Still, Larry thought, that guy wasn't really hurting anybody and, really, he was providing a bit of entertainment for the people around him. Wal-Mart, on the other hand, kills off independent retailers in the areas it goes into and pays its employees poverty-level wages. It is the largest employer in 25 states. 85% of the goods it sells are made overseas. It is stupid. Larry looked all this up (except the stupid part, that was his own opinion)...and decided it was time.

Wal-Mart.

Larry pulled his Subaru into the Wal-Mart parking lot and immediately began to feel queasy. As he looked for a parking space, the huge white letters on the blue background on the Wal-Mart building glared down at him like a knowing mother surveying her children with disdain. It knows, Larry thought. It knows what I am doing here...

Wal-Mart knows. And it wants me here.

He pulled his car into a space near the grocery cart rack halfway towards the street. As he got out of his car, he noticed that the grocery cart rack was empty, but there were Wal-Mart grocery carts everywhere else....everywhere but the grocery cart rack.

Larry's right eye began to water and he felt pain in his balls.

He paused for a second; surely this was a stupid idea. Was his ball pain a result of the stupid idea that it might be Wal-Mart causing or was it a result of Wal-Mart itself? He looked up at the sign on the Wal-Mart building. The colors, he noticed, were red, white and blue. Patriotic colors. Now *that* was stupid. Everything you sell is made in China but what you really sell is faux patriotism.

Larry's balls throbbed with pain and his right eye was swelling shut...but still Larry had to know the truth.

The Wal-Mart truth.

Either he found out the truth here and now or he would die trying. Larry was tired of not knowing, of all the fucking lack of diagnoses, of all the shame that came with random sicknesses.

He was tired of not having a girlfriend.

He walked towards the Wal-Mart and realized there were two entrances; one for the normal Wal-Mart and one for the grocery section. People bought groceries at Wal-Mart now?

Larry's face broke out with measles.

He crossed the driving lane right next to the entrance to the store; he noticed there were 6 stop signs for the cars driving in the driving lane, because of all the entrances to the Wal-Mart and the garden shop.

His ankle snapped in half.

He shuffled, much like a zombie, towards the normal entrance to the Wal-Mart. The door opened automatically.

His pancreas blew up.

He was greeted by a Wal-Mart greeter, a 74 year old former retiree who lost all of her retirement income in the crash of 2006 and was forced to get a job, with Wal-Mart being her best option.

His teeth started falling out. He didn't give a fuck. He was tired of giving fucks, so he had no more to give.

He shuffled towards the middle of the store, teeth dropping from his face like a messy child eating candy corn, blood from his ankle trailing behind him as if he were the Pied Piper of human blood. He moaned, mostly from his pancreas pain, or paincreas. He laughed, a maniacal hi-pitched laugh of a deranged man who has spent much of his adult life on a quest for answers and who has just found said answers....in the deepest, darkest pit of hell, otherwise known as your neighborhood Wal-Mart.

As he reached the electronics section, his left leg caught on fire.

Next to a box set of "Saved By The Bell" DVDs Larry saw the smiley face that indicates low, low prices and his spine shattered. As he slumped to the floor and felt the flames engulf his body he realized that, ultimately, there was no escaping stupid. It was everyfuckingwhere.

Everywhere.

There was no hope.

No girlfriend.

No esperanza.

Just stupidity....and as Larry's body peacefully shut down and he shuffled off of this mortal coil into long-lost peace, he realized coming to Wal-Mart was the smartest thing he ever did.

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