



***How Best to Avoid Dying* by Owen Egerton**

**Excerpts:**

Excerpts from *How Best to Avoid Dying, stories* by Owen Egerton

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From the Story *Spelling*

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“Me, I’m all spell. I get up, I spell. End of story. No show, no pretty dress, no little waves. Just give me the word and get out of my way. Coach says I could learn from Wilma, learn to use the positive vibes of the crowd to feed my head. But I don’t need them. I’m a badass speller. B-A-D-A-S-S. “

From the Story *Waffle*

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“Waffle Houses are magic. Eclectic gatherings. It’s a quarter till four and look at these wanderers who have found each other. The drunk stewing at the counter, the Hispanic couple cooing in booth three, the teenagers daring each other to French kiss spoonfuls of ketchup. This is life. This is America. And I’m leaving it all behind.

Hillary climbs up on the table of the booth next to mine, unbuttons her shirt and out flops her breasts. Dear God. Pink, strained flesh popping from the sides of tan mesh bra. It’s as if two shaved possums are hammocked and hibernating on her chest.”

From the Story *Christmas*

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“She placed her hands under his and closed his fingers around the gun. She raised herself to her knees and moved closer to him, lifting his hand slowly, the butt of the gun pointing at the ceiling. He was having trouble thinking. “Please,” she said. He didn’t resist her. Even opened his lips a little. He could taste metal. Tasted like lake water. He pulled his head back, away from the barrel like it was something toxic. “Shh,” she said. “You’re okay.””

From the Story *The Martyrs of Mountain Peak*

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“Rumor has it that when the waterslide panel gave he was wearing Speedos and had greased up with baby oil. Total pride. For one thing, counselors aren’t allowed to wear Speedos or two-pieces in the swimming area. When I was a camper here five years ago, not even kids could wear Speedos or two-pieces, but they’ve laxed. And baby oil? I mean, what’s Christ-like about baby oil? I was going to die on the ropes course, fully dressed.”

From the Story *Lord Baxtor Ballsington*

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“Stanley had grown to prefer masturbation to love making. More than once during his infrequent marital duties he found himself fantasizing that his wife were not below him and instead he was alone with his penis, Lord Baxtor Ballsington. He found it amusing, and a little disturbing, that as a teenager he had often pleased himself while imaging he was making love to a woman, and, now, as an adult, he made love to a woman while imaging he was pleasuring himself.”

“Paula had grown up in a non-believing Baptist family. They had relinquished all the comforts of faith, but retained the restrictions. They didn’t go to church, but they didn’t go dancing either. One of the reasons she had allowed herself to be wooed by Stanley was that he threatened none of her “morals.” Not out of morality, but out of dullness. A dull man is often a moral man.”

From the Story *Tonight at Noon*

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“But even death couldn’t stop her growing old, breaking down, wrinkling up. Process. Can’t stop it. Like running downhill, too fast, throwing your legs in front of you hoping you don’t fly head over heels. No control and no chance of gaining control. Like Mingus in some session, playing so fast, losing it, finding it, playing around a note, not on it, around and around and around till the note is clear because it’s the one thing not being played. Melody in reverse.”

“His notes are touching the melody in places it didn’t know it had. Making it bend out of itself. And you can feel the melody’s pleasure. Hear her moan. Then comes “Slop,” “Passions of a Woman Loved,” “Blue Cee,” “Gunslinging Bird,” and then “Tonight at Noon”... fucking madness, that song. Horns like horses being slaughtered, and another horn hypnotizing a snake. The bass riff like an oversized spider goose-stepping in fast motion. The piano being stomped on, danced on. And behind it all Mingus is screaming. Then comes the drums, machine guns into a circus parade. Everything screaming. Everything dying. Everything moving.”

From the Story *Lazarus Dying*

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“The first thing Jesus said to me when I stumbled from the tomb was, “I wanted to see what four days would do, Lazarus.”

I nodded and brushed some flakes from my skin. He smiled and rested a hand on my back.

“I think I’ll keep it to three,” he said.”

“Do not sleep for a year and you will remember things that never were. Do not sleep for ten years and you will mumble wisdom, cough poetry, and understand none of it. Do not sleep for a thousand years and God and Satan will dance in your throat.

I have not slept in two thousand years. My head is more blood than brains. You can hear the slush.”

“I kept the bodies in a hole cut into the banks of the river. When the hole was nearly full I crawled in among them and imagined I had found Sheol. I lay flat. In the day there was light enough to see the faces. Drawn, rotting, bearded. I spoke to them as if these were my ancestors. Here we are. Here we are. But I did not die. I did not change. At night I laid still and made no noise. When it rained, muddy water dripped from the soil above and the wind would groan.”

From the Story *The Adventures of Stimp*

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Pumpkin scratches a picture in the dirt showing a stick figure man eating a stick figure hamster and Pumpkin crouches by the drawing and nods her little head and points her little claw at her little chest and Stimp is so hungry he almost does eat Pumpkin, but instead he cuts off his own pinky with a sharp rock and makes a tiny fire to roast it over. He feeds most of it to Pumpkin and saves just a morsel for himself. As the months go by he takes another finger and another and another, till finally he only has one finger left and he can’t hold the sharp rock, not even with his toes, which would have been smarter to eat, but now he and Pumpkin just lay on their backs, hoping it will rain in their mouths, but it doesn’t and they die.

From the Story *The Fecalist*

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““Jesus fucking.” She put both hands to her face. “How many are there?”

“Twenty-four.”

“Oh, my God, Thurston, this one has blood. There is blood in your stool.”

“There is blood in me. There is blood in the world. People are bleeding,” he said, spreading his palms and softening his voice as if he were explaining death to a child.

“Don’t you see the progression? Don’t you see the arc?”

“I see shit.”

Thurston closed the study door. “Do you know my website gets over three thousand clicks a day.”

“Because people are watching you shitting yourself to death.”  
“Then that is art as well.”  
“Oh, God.””

From the Story *Licorice: a story for John Erler*  
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“After a long while, Zane asked who the young man in the bed was.  
“David, my fiancé.”  
“Oh.”

Oh, that oh. Such an oh. Like the oh collectively sighed by the population of Pompeii as the volcano’s innards streaked the sky. The oh Captain Smith murmured as he counted the lifeboats on the sinking Titanic. The oh gasped by the pilot of the Enola Gay when he glanced in his B29’s rear view mirror and saw the bright white and reds devouring Hiroshima.”

“For that first’s day’s vocal sessions he asked that the entire band and the sound engineer be in the nude.  
“Can I keep my boxers on?” asked Lane Rope.  
“Yes, of course,” Zane answered. “But each and every thread of fabric will find its way onto this album and bear witness to your shame.”  
Lane Rope removed his boxers.”

From the Story *St. Gobbler’s Day*  
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“I should also point out that Miss Gobbler is the worst storyteller the world has ever known. She could witness a four-alarm fire at a baboon farm while screwing by Mel Gibson and somehow bore you with the story.”

“When the hole is deep enough I collect her from the car. She doesn’t run, doesn’t struggle at all. She just keeps mumbling scrambled scraps from Chicken Soup stories.  
“And that boy grew up to be Dwight D. Eisenhower...”  
I lead her to the hole and have her sit down. Again, she doesn’t struggle, just more gibbering. “The kind man is the wise man, love conquers all, hold on Friday’s a coming.”  
When the first shovel full of sandy dirt lands on her lap she let’s out a yelp. Then she goes quiet. More quiet than I’ve ever known her to be. The dirt gets higher. At one point, she tries to stand, but I shove her back down. Once the dirt is up to her chest, standing is no longer possible. She only starts screaming when the dirt reaches her neck. A harsh, cutting scream, but I keep to my work.”

From the Story *Arnie’s Gift*  
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““I can be late once.”

“It’s that kind of attitude that gave away the promotion to Peter Wicks. You think Peter Wicks tries to mount his wife in the broad morning light? Not a chance. If he wants to mount her, he takes her out for a nice meal, maybe some wine, maybe a movie—a good movie, too. Not some crappy movie.”

“I didn’t know it was going to be crappy. The poster looked good.”

“Reviews, Arnie. That’s why God made reviews. You can bet your balding ass that Peter Wicks reads reviews before he drags his wife out to see a three hour piece of crap. And he doesn’t drag, because she wants to go and it’s not crap because he reads the reviews, and he reads the reviews because he loves her. Now go to work.””

From the Story *Lish*

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“Once she had tried to write a three worded poem. She got as far as “Loosely Gargle” and hit a block. For days she prayed that the third word would fall from heaven, float down like a piece of cloud and land in her pink and purple notebook. “Come on, God,” she whispered. “Lend a hand.” But God gave no word. Eventually she stopped waiting and considered the poem complete. When she read it, she always paused for an extra beat after “Gargle” and before her curtsy. That extra space is what made the poem special. It quickly became her favorite poem because it had been coauthored by God. She had written the words and He had written the silence.”