

# *The Figments*

Three Short Stories

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written by Patrick Gaughan

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illustrated by Hanna S. Abi-Hanna

It's much easier to talk to yourself than to other people. People criticize. People manipulate. Your head is safer, with its defined walls, and those people, the ones who try to pick you apart and control you, can't enter if you don't let them. Inside you make your own companions or kidnap them and hold them and you all live peacefully, all together, and you're never alone.

- Jerry

# Figment I

## Jerry's Birthday Wish

*I doubt that the imagination can be suppressed. If you truly eradicated it in a child, he would grow up to be an eggplant. - Ursula K. Le Guin*



If Billy from Manor Drive came over, he would want to play wiffleball, and Jerry didn't feel like chasing the ball around the yard all day. Wiffleball's no fun with two people. Tom from four doors down might be home, but he was much more interested in playing police games with plastic guns. They would run around Jerry's brick house, their little mouths making laser sounds, "Pew! Pew! Pew!," until the inevitable argument would ensue: "You're dead – I shot you a thousand times!" "No way, you missed me" and so on. There was Charlie from school, who had invited Jerry to his first sleepover a few weeks ago, but Charlie liked monster movies and Jerry almost shat himself having to sleep in the dark that night.

After this deliberation, Jerry decided to spend his seventh birthday alone.

“You’re sure?” His concerned mother replied. “Your grandparents are coming for cake and ice cream. You don’t want to have a friend over?”

“No,” said Jerry, as he lifted his bowl to his mouth to slurp the excess milk from his Rice Krispies. He polished off a Flintstone vitamin with the last of his orange juice.

“I don’t have time today. I need to concentrate on my birthday wish,” he informed his mother, and he retired up the stairs to his room, his sanctuary.

Inside were four tan walls, a window, a dresser, a desk, a closet door which he always kept closed so monsters who lived there wouldn’t get him, and a bed pushed against the wall to maximize play space in the center of the room. All these things were fine, but to Jerry, the crown jewel of the collection was always the spread of blue carpet. His favorite toys were his pirate figures, and that carpet was his ocean.

There the waves smashed on cliffs as ships cannoodled through coves, and the wind flapped a giant skull and crossbones. Crew members scurried about the deck in their bandanas and peglegs, battening down hatches and spying ships off the starboard bow. An entire afternoon would spill by with Jerry holding the little pirates in his little hands, his legs Indian-style atop the vast blue sea. His crew would climb the mountainous peaks of his bedposts in search of treasure. From his desk, they would plot their next raid on the uniformed colonial soldiers, then leap with legs churning and flailing onto the enemy fort, slashing off heads as they landed.

Jerry wanted to be a pirate more than anything, and William Fly, the captain of the ship “Fame’s Revenge,” was his idol, his little plastic prophet. When Jerry’s figurine William Fly climbed the mast, Jerry felt the splinters on his fingers. Fly wore the coolest blue bandana and a ripped up shirt striped in red and black. Heroic brown hair fell into his eyes. And tonight, Jerry would use his birthday wish to ask the real Captain Fly to take him away. He’d practiced the words of the wish for months, to be sure he’d get it right. “I wish to be a member of Captain Fly’s crew.”

That night, Jerry’s mother shut off the lights, his stepfather held a camera, his grandparents smiled, his two-year-old sister, Laney, leaned in and they all sang in unison. The candles illuminated Jerry’s face, turning it orange and evil. He heard the first “Happy Birthday to...” and then he stopped hearing. Gulls crowed and he felt the waves splash his cheeks and he smelt fresh gun powder. All the possessions from his room at home sat behind him on the deck of the “Fame’s Revenge.” He feverishly shovelled them up into his arms, as many as he could carry, and heaved them overboard. His green toothbrush, piles of T-shirts, souvenirs from his family’s trips to Atlantic City. Everything into the water. He peered into the sea. The last of the old Happy Meal toys and pairs of shoes bobbed once, twice on the surface until the water swallowed every last item. Jerry wished as hard as he could, recited the words exactly as planned, inhaled enough air to sustain him until his eighth birthday, and blew out the candles.

Later, the wind danced the drawn blinds in his room, grabbing them by the neck, then slamming them against the window frame.

“You’re sure you can sleep with that noise? Why don’t I close it a little?” said Jerry’s mother as she tucked him in.

“No, it needs to stay open.” Because he’s coming for me.

She pulled the blankets to his chin. “So what did you wish for? You seemed so focused with your candles.”

“If I tell you, it won’t come true.”

“Such a secretive little boy. Is there anything on your mind, Jerry? Your father

and I were a bit concerned when you didn't want any friends at your party. Is everything okay?"

"Yep, everything's fine."

"Well, if you need to talk to someone, you can talk to me or Dad, okay?"

"Okay."

"I love you, Jerry."

"I love you, too, Mom."

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Hours later, he still lay in the dark waiting, eyes open and lost in the rhythmic banging of the blinds. "They're coming. I know it," he whispered. He tried and tried, but eventually his eyelids fell and he was asleep.

The door creaked.

"Captain Fly?"

Hallway light spilled in. A shadow crawled the wall. The door opened further. A human outline. Could it be?

"Captain Fly!" Jerry leapt towards the shadow. It grew a tricornered hat and drew a sword.

"I have you now, Fly!" A colonial soldier jabbed at Jerry, and he darted against the wall, narrowly avoiding the blade. Jerry yanked a broadsword from his hip, engaging the soldier. "En garde!"

Jerry forced his foe into the hallway, their blades shrieking on contact, their feet shuffling for position. Jerry spied the stairs in the corner and lured the soldier towards them.

"Tonight, Fly, you die!" Down came the soldier's sword, slicing through the bannister.

Jerry dipped to the side, kicking his enemy from behind. The soldier's momentum tumbled his body down the stairs, his red coat flailing until he thumped into a broken heap at the bottom. Jerry, pleased with himself, returned the sword to his hip. Then he heard the soldier crying.

Down the stairwell, Laney, in her pony pajamas, lay unmoving except for her mouth bellowing. Jerry ran into his room, slammed and locked the door.

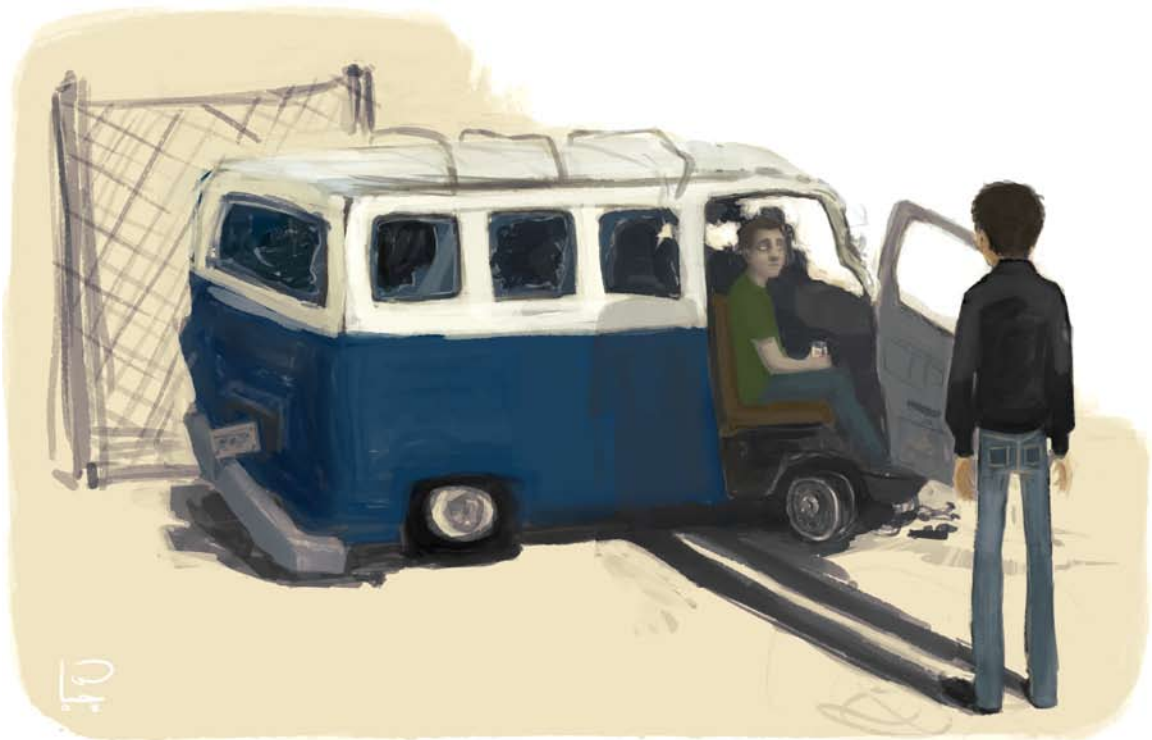
He heard his parents scramble out, probably in bathrobes. "Oh my God, Laura! What happened?" He heard her rat him out between wheezes and wails, and then trying, shaking the doorknob and then pounding, "Jerry! Jerry, you get out here! Open this door! You tell me what happened right now!"

But Jerry wasn't hearing again. He was lying supine on his floor, floating, weaving with the waves, gazing at the sky, allowing the water to consume him.

## Figment II

### Hey Tom!

*It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see. -Henry David Thoreau*



Tonight, Tom, I can see the past completely even though I wasn't there. I know I came with you last year, but this year there was a picnic with Debra's family and honestly, I thought I'd grown out of weekends camping in the knoll of the Pocono Raceway, motors circling us as we tried to stave off the real world by slugging back Coors, can after can. So when you came to my door to plead, "Come on! One last time, just climb in the back, Debra won't care," I sent you back empty-handed. I waved goodbye from the porch as you slid into that same old Volkswagon Bus, Bill next to you, hitting the gas, the horn tooting "So Long!" and you snagging Can #1 from the cooler and Pop!

Now I see you more often, but you're a ghost-man, Tom. Let me play back that weekend for you. I see you and Bill jabbing away, clanking the cans together as you roll

north up Highway 83 guzzling, Jimmy Page jostling the windows as you razz me behind my back, “Jer-Bear’s lost his cool! The ball and chain’s bringing him down!” I know, I know.

Saturday hits, the cars blurring by. You and Bill spinning. The cans and the weed and the new friends in mesh hats and torn shirts, with those cars ripping all around.

Time to leave that night and Bill calls out, “I’ll drive!”

“You sure, man?”

“Yeah, yeah.” You curl up, head against the window as the traffic disperses. And you didn’t wake up, Tom. From the time you left that parking lot until you crawled into my head. I see you sleeping like a baby as the night wears on, this time no music, no drunken-fever glee. Bill’s head nods on the highway and he catches himself, then nods again until he doesn’t see the tractor trailer who parked himself on the side of the road to sleep for the night. Neither of you see it, but I see it now: the reflectors of the bumper glowing yellow and red in the VW’s white headlights, trying to scream at both of you. Anything to get your attention, to open your eyes. I see the truck as a tiny spot that’s growing and growing as the VW’s tires ease to the wrong side of the white line. Those reflectors were right in front of you, Tom. I see them.

That night, Tom, your dad called my house, woke Debra and I up and told me. I was shirtless in my bed, but somehow drove to the hospital. Bill was there, and your parents, the nurses, people. Your dad went outside to smoke. I went with him to get the hell out of there. He leaned against a railing, blowing smoke and cursing Bill, trying not to cry until a tear would slip and I would pretend not to notice, for his sake. I wanted to tell him that I saw everything, the whole weekend, and that it wasn’t Bill’s fault, but it didn’t seem appropriate out there under the hazy light in the hospital entryway. The tinted bulbs turned the sidewalk orange. Then some employee walked out with facial hair like yours, Tom, and I could of sworn it was you.

“Hey Tom!” I called out. The guy didn’t acknowledge me.

Your dad turned to me, “Wait. What’d you say?”

“Nothing.”

That was the first one, Tom, but there have been others. I saw you buying Cup Noodles and orange juice at Weis Market. Downing whiskey shots with some guys I didn’t know at The Eagle. Playing second base for the Phillies. Pumping gas into a Chevy, leering from street corners, at work asking me, “Jerry, what do you want for lunch?”

“Hey Tom!” I yell out. Every time.

One time I did it in my living room. You were reading the paper on my couch on a Saturday afternoon. You put the paper in your lap and you were Debra. Staring back at me, frightened.

“Jerry, why can’t you talk to me about this?”

“It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing, it’s a big, weird problem. If you can’t talk to me, fine. But you need to find somebody. You need to just let this out. It’s been too long.”

The next day, Tom, I made an appointment with my parents’ priest, Father Mike. I know, I know.

“I’m glad you came, Jerry. Let’s go for a walk.” We paced laps around the hall behind the church until all hours with me spilling it all, and whenever I ran out of words, he’d ask me something like “Do you blame Bill?” and I’d be off again, babbling my brain out, spewing the contents of my closet on the floor. I told him everything, all about seeing you everywhere, and playing that weekend in my head, and how I don’t blame Bill and

never will.

I told him about how that night, the night it happened, I drove to the impound lot and found the busted up VW Bus. How I didn't have to open the passenger door because it was flapping wide open and how I reached under the seat and took the weed. I knew it would be there, I know you, Tom, and the last thing I wanted was the police to find it and send Bill, with his broken ribs and toothless mouth, to jail. I don't blame Bill. I told Father Mike how I slipped the baggie in my pocket and left the VW behind for the last time with the sky all huge like I bet it is out West and how I knew you were proud of me.

"That's what best friends are for," said Father Mike as he draped his comforting arm on me. We finally walked back to his office, and he said, "Goodnight, Jerry" and I said "Goodnight, Father Mike."

"If you need anything else, you come talk to me."

I shut the door to his office and the weight on me since your dad woke me up that night left, all except for my guilt about hiding from Father Mike that I never want another best friend. Debra's brother always invites me out for breakfast with this buddies on Saturdays and Charlie, my new business partner, really tries, on fishing weekends and at happy hours, but I won't betray you, Tom. Don't worry. I'm okay enough that Debra and my parents and everybody don't worry anymore, but I don't want you worrying either. I know you wouldn't want me abandoning you. I know, Tom. Just chug a Coors and relax. I see you.

## Figment III

### What You Think About When You're 73

*My alphabet starts with this letter called yuzz. It's the letter I use to spell yuzz-a-ma-tuzz. You'll be sort of surprised what there is to be found once you go beyond 'Z' and start poking around! ~Dr. Seuss*



When you're seventy-three and she spends her evenings in the living room and you spend yours in the basement, you need to break things up so you think about being young. When I crawl in next to Debra, who has already been snoozing for two hours, I pull the covers close, shut my eyes, and think of Abbie.

Down the empty hallway of my high school one day after a Peer Counseling meeting, I catch up to Abigail Morliny on the way to her locker. Bill used to date her, all her freckles and curly red hair, and we'd asked him, "Are red heads more fun?" and he'd said, "Hell yeah!" but that's been over for awhile now. So, partly because I think she's the

cutest girl that no one really fussed over, partly because I'm almost sure she'll say "Yes," and mostly because I know Susan Kellar, my crush for years, is going with Charlie Seidel, I tap Abbie on the shoulder and ask, "Hey Abbie, do you have a date for the Snowflake Ball?"

"No, not yet."

"Do you want to go with me?"

"Yeah, Jerry, that would be great."

"Cool."

And even though I was really only looking for a date to the dance, Abbie starts treating me like a boyfriend. The next day, when I see her in the hallway, I smile sheepishly, but Abbie takes my arm and asks, "Hey you, how's your day?" in a tone a bit deeper and stronger than I'd noticed before. When we arrive at the door to Mrs. Shay's English class, she kisses me on the cheek saying, "Call me tonight," hands me a piece of paper, and shoves me playfully into the class, the paper reading, "I'll be home after seven, 545-4787, Abbie," written in green ink, the 'i' dotted with a heart.

Now she's everywhere. Not the surface Abbie who flatters teachers and wears her hair up, but the Abbie with curls who grabs me by the tie and kisses me harshly, swerving her tongue without worrying about teeth. Her kisses don't tease. They're determined, purposeful.

She asks me, "What's your favorite part of a girl?" I can't really say breasts because Abbie doesn't have much there, but her legs are knockouts, so that's my answer.

"Is that right? Jerry, the leg-man?" She grips my arm stronger and wears short dresses the rest of the week, only for me.

For my seventeenth birthday, Abbie comes early to help my mother set up napkins and plates and chips, soda, pretzels. Once everyone leaves, she gives me a wrapped present, a blue sweater that looks too small and isn't my style and I know I'll never wear it. "Thank you, I really like it."

"Good, I'm glad." A minute later, the sweater's on the floor and so is her shirt and I see freckles everywhere. My fingers clench the red curl nest. They weave through red mazes, grabbing and possessing.

She touches me. I hadn't been touched before. Her hands aren't smooth or graceful or seamless like I'd envisioned. They're coarse, they pull and shake and plead with me, "Love me, Jerry, love me!" She doesn't say it, but I feel it. You can't own me, Abbie. I won't let you. I'm tense. I shrink.

The Snowflake Ball is Saturday. I'll take her, but I'm determined not to try. I even forget her corsage at my house on purpose. Her father answers the door and tells me she's in the next room, waiting.

When you're an old man lying in bed watching a memory play that's almost sixty years old, all that remains are still photographs in your head. You piece them together with remembered feelings and make a flipbook, and if some photos are missing, you replace them with composites that are ten times better and more romantic than the reality ever was. When you're seventy-three, the past is cinematic.

I round the corner to the living room. She stands before me. It's all orange and twilight bounces off the couches and she's imperfectly beautiful. My Abbie. Her black dress would be classic on anyone else, but on Abbie, with her freckly shoulders exposed and her hair up, I see it strangling her. She smiles because she's done this for me, tried her best to look traditionally beautiful, tried to look like Susan Kellar because she knows that's what I'd rather have. But I know the real Abbie is all love and freckles and legs and curls,

and in that moment, she wins. I finally love her.

This is where the pictures stop. The rest isn't a vision, only facts. A week later, I called Abbie over to my house and broke up with her. She felt things so much deeper than I ever could, and it was scary, suffocating. She left a four page letter in my locker pleading for me to take her back, saying, "What is it? Talk to me. We can change it. Talk to me." I never replied because I didn't know how.

I don't have photos in my head of Abbie hiding tears in my bedroom or of the night Tom told me he scored with her and I didn't talk to him for months or of two years later, when we were out of school, and Bill told me he heard she was already pregnant and living with some guy in Chicago. Those are simply events that happened that I remember. But the things that change you brand themselves in, the extreme highs and lows, the pirouettes and ambushes, and they loop and fight and morph on their own. Colors thicken, words amplify, crashes deepen, love swells, and memories that were never there bubble to life.

These daydreams are the last thing keeping me real. I have a grandson, he prefers the full Jerome to Jerry, and I know to him I'm no more than an endearing old fart carving up a turkey on Thanksgiving, laughing at my own stupid jokes. When I walk in my neighborhood with a scarf on my throat and feel the seasons changing and my legs slowing, I know he's right. So to keep afloat I need to know those curls are still as red as I remember, even though I'm sure they greyed years ago in some dot of a Midwestern town. When you're seventy-three and you don't feel like watching TV anymore, that's what you think about.

I roll over in bed and steal some covers back from Debra, who mumbles "Goodnight, Jerry" in her sleep.

"Goodnight, Debra."

Goodnight, Tom.

Goodnight, Abbie. I'll see you tomorrow.