

Crossing the Border of Dreams

This is a story about one Mr. Chatbury. I was given it by a faceless man yesterday in the twilight hours at the edge of the city where the law is not what it is in other parts of town. On ragged paper it was written, as ragged as the man's beard; beautifully curvy handwriting, black ink – like they used to write in a time long gone.

Though the story is brand-new.

Talk to me the man did not. He had disappeared into the boundaries of dreams that only the wafts of early morning mist provide, long before I had gathered my senses and formed a question in my mind.

Mr. Chatbury lived in a world frightfully similar to ours. One of those worlds that reminded you that nothing was certain and things could be ever slightly so different if only a few circumstances or determinants changed to the effect that outcomes became less desirable than what could have been expected.

As this is the beginning of our story it would have been logical if one might have wanted to ask what kind of person Mr. Chatbury was and one would have gotten the following unsatisfactory answer: Mr. Chatbury was all nose; all nose and a little bit of hair. But since nobody asked, this valuable piece of information shall be withheld for just a little while longer which can, no doubt, only benefit the unfolding of the narrative.

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Mr. Chatbury was all nose; all nose and a little bit of hair.

Behind his enormous olfactory organ all other facial features seemed to vanish like on the magician's stage rabbits and innocent virgins. So far he had not regarded this as a major problem, though he was a bit worried about the virgins. Sure, other people made fun of him. Children in particular were outrageously cruel, unabashedly pointing out his shortcomings wherever he went – though shortcomings was

probably the wrong choice of words. Penisocchio was still one of the nicer names that kids called him by.

More often than not food was dripping off his nose tip whenever he ate soup or stew or anything liquid in a bowl for that matter.

One time he had set off the alarm at the Modern Gallery of Art when he was a child as he swiped down a series of invaluable Greek marble statues (nobody knew what was so modern about Greek statues, but they were there) when he vigorously started shaking his head on being asked by his mother whether he needed to use the facilities.

Hayfever had forever bothered him, especially since his nostrils basically sucked in everything that wasn't nailed to the ground – and that included hay and a significant amount of fever.

But all the ridicule and mockery and inconvenience that came with having such a gigantic bulb sitting in his face simply rolled off Mr. Chatbury like water droplets on a blossoming lotus flower. He was pretty happy with himself and the world.

Ethan Chatbury never spoke to anyone.

His parents had done a marvelous job raising him especially considering the outstanding quality of the nose of the youngest son of Allan and Martha Chatbury, PhD. Their reassuring and loving affection provided the calm center of the infant's infinitely overflowing, awe-inducing universe that was key to every child's happiness and healthy independence.

The most valuable lesson he had learnt from his parents was probably that he shouldn't beat himself up or question himself and his sense of identity EVER. Because there was one important thing to understand as his parents had explained to him:

Most of the time when we are overpowered by our inner critic and feel insufficient or inadequate, it is not because we are, or because mother nature or the gods (depending on what you believe in) have a cruel sense of humor, but because we are surrounded by a bunch of assholes.

This realization at a very young age, combined with Mr. Chatbury's unique nature which had blessed him with high intelligence though a very low degree of self-awareness had guided him through an early

life that had spared him the gaping mental scars which so often end in suicide, eating disorders and the likes.

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At the age of nineteen, Ethan Chatbury started working in the food, beverage and perfume industry. He was an absolute maven when it came to fragrances, tangs, flavors and aromas. Every day he would sit in the laboratory for hours and hours, testing new products, experimenting with new formulas, tinkering with the Xs and Os of the most complex textures and aromatic mixtures.

He became the backbone of an entire industry that had developed around peoples' desire for illusions and unrealities; the constructor of wondrous facades so perfect and alluring that they immediately triggered an irrepressible deluge of emotions and sweeping happiness. Once you stepped inside a Sephora store or a cosmetics & soap shop, or you took a whiff of a delicious carrot cake you would enter Chatbury realm.

He was the hidden face of an entire cosmos of smells and tastes – sensory overflow of a brilliant mind (and nose). The wizard of the invisible would persuade you effortlessly through the gravitational force of intricate or sometimes ridiculously simple chemical compounds that the hotdog that you sunk your teeth into and the eau de cologne that you sprinkled behind your earlobes were superior to nature.

Ethan sold the illusionary promise of imaginary perfection – and he did so with the largest nose mankind had ever seen.

For the best of twenty years, Ethan thus became completely absorbed by his work of creating the perfect artificial world for others. He had no hobbies, no social contacts, no wife or girlfriend, no children to look after and care about; he had no guilty pleasures, never traveled and he had no inclination whatsoever to elevate his life beyond this job that excluded him from everything else there was.

At one point Ethan even gave up his apartment and fully moved into the laboratory; that is he added a bookshelf filled with his large collection of books and a couple of suitcases to a mattress that had already been lying in the corner of the room for almost six years. His

colleagues and his boss thought of this as completely normal. They had never seen the lab without Ethan anyway.

Ethan Chatbury became extremely rich because of his groundbreaking work, though that was rather an obnoxious side-effect to him than something to aspire to. Money meant nothing. He would not have known what to spend it on anyways. It was the almost god-like feeling of expanding and recreating the world and affecting the lives of billions of people in the course of it that drove him on and fed his passion.

And indelibly leave his mark on the world (as well as on the aging mattress that was lying in that lonesome corner of the isolated laboratory) Ethan did. The gods themselves would probably have needed an eighth day in keeping up with the frantic pace in which Ethan turned the inner world of smells and tastes inside out. Ever adding to an exceedingly multifarious and subtle web of sensory experiences, Ethan had the whole world lying at his feet.

Nothing was missing in his life, Ethan thought. Perfection. There was absolute clarity to be found within the maze of sensory impressions that only he could fully pervade. Ethan was in utter control of his world.

This is why it seemed all the stranger when one day he woke up on his chafed, worn out mattress and felt an odd sense of yearning within his chest. A feeling of incompleteness rushed through his blood and Ethan suddenly started breathing laboriously. His chest heaving up and down violently, he opened the window, tore off his shirt and desperately gasped for fresh air.

As beads of sweat ran down his face and breast, he would slowly compose himself again. He sat down on the battered mattress, exhausted. Staring into the void of the deserted laboratory he began contemplating what might have been the cause for the sudden seizure.

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For days, Ethan sat there on the mattress, in the lab that had genially confined him for almost twenty years. Completely motionless, staring

over the mountainous hump at the center of his nose, he numbly ignored hunger, thirst and the puzzled queries of his colleagues, who stopped caring fairly quickly as they successfully tried not to get involved.

When Ethan finally rose from his stupor, full two weeks had passed. It was midnight, myriads of stars lit up the cloudless sky with dim, shimmering hope. Ethan clumsily shuffled towards the bookshelf and browsed through the vast array of scientific essays, novels and magazines.

His fingers hesitated at a small, A5 format picture book for children: *The Mole That Never Saw The World* by Penny Feathersome. One of the accounting clerks from the third floor had given it to him a few years back as a present to his children. It was a blessing how well people at work knew each other. It was almost as precious as thoughtful gifts.

Having no children, Ethan undoubtedly had never so much as even opened the book, but for some reason his left hand now pulled out the book almost as if remotely controlled and Ethan crouched down on his dissipating mattress again. Leaning against the wall, Ethan lit an old oil-lamp and started reading.

A curious little baby mole once ventured away from the safety of his den.

Black fur he had and dirty he was from digging tunnels in the underground.

He had hands and feet like shovels and his snout that looked like a naked tube

Was not very pretty either.

Sniffing and snuffing around for food the little baby mole bumped into a

Beautiful, majestic fox.

The fox had a magnificent shiny red fur, wide sparkling eyes

And a sophisticated bushy tail with a spotless snow white tip.

“Hey, you! We don’t like the likes of you around here, hole-digger,”

The fox growled at the little baby mole derogatively.

“Should I ever see you here again, I shall kill you,”

And having said this, the racist fox substantiated his threat

By bashing in the poor baby mole’s eyes and thus blinding it forever.

At this point, Ethan paused for a moment and wondered about the graphic violence and use of strong language in the picture book. He was glad that he didn’t have children who he might have accidentally read this to. It seemed rather inappropriate. The story fascinated him though.

Deeply hurt, the baby mole struggled back home and decided

Never to set foot outside of his underground den ever again.

Over the years, the little mole built the most sophisticated

Tunnel system the world had ever seen to keep himself busy;

With great cavernous hallways framed by crystal pillars,

Enchanted underground gardens overflowing with vibrant flowers

And even a little chapel decorated with the pain of blindfolded angels.

Here the little mole drank from precious golden goblets alone,

Ate the most decadent delicacies the world had to offer alone,

Swam in a lustrous ocean of gemstones and jewels alone

And shed tears of desperation in the Naked Chamber alone,

*A flowstone cave located in the very center of his realm
In which the falling of his tears reverberated through eternal darkness.*

All the mole ever wanted was to see and travel the world.

But he could not!

He was destined to stay and die alone.

After almost twenty years of living thus a wise owl paid the mole a visit.

The owl whispered into the little moles ear:

“But happiness is a choice.

Whether you wake up in the morning with sunshine in your face

Or with gloom in your eyes is entirely up to you.

The solution lies within your mind.”

His faith and confidence thus restored,

The little mole packed his things

And set out to explore the world at the crack of dawn.

As the little mole was about to cross through a wide open field of gold

He was smacked down by the red fox and he died instantly.

The very next day the wise owl organized a memorial service for the little mole.

The tombstone read:

They say that happiness is a choice

*That you can redirect your inner voice
 Within an instance from utter gloom to utter joy,
 Just change your mind you silly boy.*

*But that is only half the truth
 Coz when you're crushed by the ruthless boot
 Of blind hate; the madness of a strong aggressor
 It is necessary that we as a community stand together
 As One
 And not leave our weakest links alone
 With their happy mind!*

*Those attending the funeral nervously shuffled their feet on the gravel path.
 Nobody dared to look into each others' eyes.
 And the little mole was henceforth dead happily ever after.*

Ethan Chatbury closed the book and rubbed the side of his nose so vigorously, a hidden observer would have almost expected sparks of magic to spring off it. After having read the tragic story about the little mole, Ethan felt more elated than downcast.

Traveling the world!?

It had never occurred to him that despite all his success that affected virtually everyone around the world, he had actually never set foot outside his native soil. He never needed to. He never wanted to. He got everything he had a desire for right here at the lab.

As a matter of fact he hadn't left the laboratory for the past twelve years and he had only once ever left the city and that was as a three

year old boy and it had included a lot of screaming and kicking. His bruised parents then decided that vacations with Ethan were probably not such a great idea and ever since had just left him with the housekeeper whenever they felt like they needed a change of air.

But now ...

Traveling the world!

The thought of the possibilities alone of experiencing new odors and flavors gave Ethan an instant rush and helped him breathe more freely again. To inhale the scent of the big wide world now and forever tomorrow.

He immediately got onto the internet and began doing some research on possible destinations.

A few hours later he had booked a flight and a visa appointment at the embassy of the United States of America. The vastness of the Everglades, the solitude of the Rocky Mountains, the forever-stretching variety of salt pans, sand dunes and badlands of the Death Valley ...

The land of the free seemed like the perfect starting point to Ethan.

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Next thing, Ethan was standing in the street in the early morning hours waving at cars with a big dumb smile on his face.

It was a dismal beginning to the day. Violent gusts of wind drilled steely pellets of water into Ethan's face. It would have felt like thousands of tiny bamboo sticks snapping against his skin if Ethan had felt anything at that moment. But his head was somewhere else, way above the clouds that turned the streets into one big blur of gray mash.

If the rushing torrents of rain had soaked him through right down to his underpants within a matter of minutes, it was streams of rainwater that gushingly sluiced down his sticky skin after twisting in the wind for an hour and a half. Still waving at the cars dashing by, none of the drivers had as much as even hinted at slowing down and stopping for him.

Finally, the gods seemed to have mercy on him. A yellow cab pulled over right into the huge puddle of murky, brownish water in front of which Ethan was smartly waiting, which would have soddened Ethan's clothes even further, if the law of saturation hadn't had other plans.

Awkwardly, Ethan opened the back door of the taxi.

"Hey mate, lovely weather today, ay?"

Sarcasm had never been one of Ethan's strong points. Helplessly he managed to stammer a "hmm" after a few infinite seconds of intensive thinking, then he happily stared ahead through the windshield, his upper body leaning forward, resting on his knees.

After half a minute of gawky, stiff silence, the cab driver eventually sighed and asked: "So where to pal?"

"Oh, um ..."

Ethan looked puzzled.

"... can you take me to one of them photo shops?"

"You mean, like a photo studio?"

"Er, yes! I need to have some passport pictures taken."

"You wouldn't happen to have an address?"

"Um, er ... no! Just any kind of photo studio will do."

The driver mumbled something, inserted the first gear and off they went. Ethan was glad the conversation was over. Talking to people made him uncomfortable. It didn't seem natural.

The cab driver stopped at the corner of Raption Street & Haffington Boulevard, in front of a large shop window. There was a king-sized black-and-white photograph of a ten year old boy in a wedding dress, announcing that *'Everybody can look good in anything with our photographers'*. The name of the store was Cheese'N'Snap.

When Ethan entered the studio he could smell the scent of old linoleum and celluloid, but not a hint of cheese, which he found confusing. A young, dynamic man in his thirties greeted Ethan, wearing a smart pink Oxford business shirt and jeans. He was sporting a cleanly trimmed goatee, his hair tightly greased back with way too much gel.

“Howdy! Goodness you look dreadful. Sit down,” he said, as if it was one syllable, quickly disappeared to the back of the store and came back with a pile of white terry towels.

After Ethan had groomed himself to a more respectful appearance and explained to Tucker that he needed a set of passport pictures for a visa application, he was immediately ushered in front of a white screen.

Tucker started experimenting with different settings and tricks of the trade. He soon started sweating nervously as he took picture, after picture, after picture, every time hissing something disgruntledly that Ethan couldn't quite understand.

He powdered Ethan's nose, used cleanser and make-up, moved the lighting umbrellas around, changed the lens, changed the lens again, applied more powder, put on different reflectors and changed the lens once more, all the while swearing and cussing.

At the end of the day, Ethan looked at a digital grid of pictures on Tucker's laptop that contained all nose and a little bit of hair. In some his nose looked paler, in some it threw large shades on one side or the other, in some his nose was more pinkish. In all of them his nose was huge, taking up the entire picture (with a little bit of hair).

Ethan happily settled for a picture that looked like a hog-nosed coon wearing a crown of wispy toupee (so basically like all the others) and returned home (that is to the laboratory).

On Wednesday, Ethan held his one year business visa in his hands. He had applied for the 24 hours priority business visa service through his company. The cost for the visa and the express service came down to a whopping 1522 Dollars, but this was no time to be penny-pinching.

First there had been some problems at the reception desk of the embassy. He had handed over his passport, passport pictures, banking statements and supporting documents to the officer in charge. The officer blankly stared at the documents and Ethan's face (or rather nose) alternately through the dividing texture of thick safety plexiglass. He then drily told him to take a seat and wait. He picked up the receiver of his phone and made a call.

After a short while, a second officer joined him in the reception booth and after a lot of staring, gesturing, talking on the phone and more staring, the two were joined by yet two further officers.

Eventually the most senior officer came out of the booth, slowly approached Ethan whilst desperately attempting not to fixate his vision on the nose and shook his hand in a businesslike way:

“We are glad you have chosen the Priority Business Visa Service, our premium service that ensures the smoothest process for your application. If you could please also provide us with the payment notice to show that the banking transaction has been carried out and then follow me to my office.”

As Ethan produced the desired piece of paper, a gracious smile appeared on the officer’s face that beamed directly at Ethan’s nose and after a quick interview Ethan left the embassy with the road to America paved by the affluent hands of a certain Mr. Benjamin Franklin. It was good to have powerful friends.

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Less than ten hours later, Ethan is standing in line for the passport and security check at Ephemeral Hope Airport. His flight is scheduled to leave in two hours and twenty minutes. The line is moving slowly but steadily. It is quite humid. Ethan tiredly wipes away the sweat off his enormous sneezer. People are obliquely staring at his nose and the sparse hair. He is uncomfortably aware of it, but he just focuses his eyes on the back of the head of the man in front. A moving target for social avoidance.

It is his turn. He unhastily slides the flight ticket and his passport through the gap between counter and thick security glass and says, “Good morning, Sir,”

in a friendly but unobtrusive manner.

“---,”

is the eloquent yet frosty answer.

Ethan swallows to rid himself of the discomfort that is suddenly emanating from an unlocatable area of his body. The swallowed

saliva seems to be dispensing towards the rest of his limbs and the feeling of discomfort heightens.

Nausea.

The officer is fumbling through his passport.

Stares at him.

Stares at the passport.

Ethan is clumsily avoiding to look at the officer in his black uniform; the epaulettes that indicate that the officer is a deputy chief; the tag that says ‘Salem Legal Purgatory – Customs and Border Protection Since 1692’; the dimple in his chin; the shaven, stubbly black hair.

One of those moments of silent awkwardness in the face of authority. Ethan is solicitously fidgeting around with his collar.

The officer stares at him again.

Stares at the passport.

Empty eyes.

“We’re afraid we can’t allow you to proceed beyond this point. You are not allowed on this flight, Sir! Please step out of the line and make space for the next person. Thank you!”

He shoves passport and flight ticket back over the counter without moving.

“---

What? But why?”

“A disclosure of reasons is not required in this respect, Sir. Like everybody else at the point of border protection you have very little rights, as has been ensured by our just and equitable jurisprudence. Please leave this area and return to the arrivals hall. Thank you!”

“But ... this is not *fair!* I got a visa and everything. Why won’t you let me on the flight? I’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Sir, it is not your visa that grants you access to the country, it is *us* who grant access to the country and weighing all the circumstances, we cannot allow you on the flight. This is in the best interest of everybody. Now I’m telling you the last time to leave this area, or I will have you removed by security!”

“But ... but ... How can you do this? What circumstances? I have rights. Inalienable rights,” Ethan says with tears in his eyes.

“Not here you don’t! Please leave the premises, Sir. Thank you!”

“But I did *nothing* wrong,” Ethan says, inadvertently screaming.

“Please leave the premises, Sir. Thank you!”

A security officer grabs him by the arm and jostles him towards the exit.

“What am I being charged with? I did *nothing* wrong!”

“It is rather self-evident, Sir! Please leave the premises, Sir. Thank you! Next!”

Tears of desperation meander down Ethan’s cheeks, as he is being walked back towards the entrance hall, humiliated and violated beyond belief. He whispers hoarsely, implores other people for help. That they should not allow this injustice to happen. To stand up and help him. They saw what happened, right?!

People stare at the floor which seems to have become the major point of interest. Clean and smooth it is; beautiful white glossy tiles that shine with the reflection of bright neon-lighting.

Tear drops fall on the impeccable, waxed tiles.

Footgear squeaks on the floor, where people tread on the wet spots. Unwarily.

Gradually people start talking to each other again. The noise level reaches its usual drowning out hum. The blaring buzz of human communication. Alleviating return to normalcy.

And what could they do, Ethan resigns. After all, they are only people and people can’t compete with a mighty system of injustice, he thinks as he passes a throng of people outside the airport hangar protesting for rescuing the whales.

Ethan climbs into a taxi.

Tonight he does not sleep at the lab; does not sleep at all. Errs around the city, dazed. All nose and a little bit of hair.

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The next day, Ethan takes to Immaculate Self-Mutilation and cuts off his nose with a kitchen knife.

Wounds heal fast, or so they say.

One of the best attributes of human beings is they are adaptable. One of the worst attributes of human beings is they are adaptable.

He appears faceless at the airport again and books a new ticket. On the ticket where it says name, it reads White, No Identity, Seat Number 3A.

The security officer waves him through, mumbling something about a computer system error. All the other passengers have the exact same identity-less tickets.

On the aircraft, Ethan sits in business class, feeling lucky that everything went so smoothly this time around.

Sits in a row with other people as faceless as him, White.

Everybody looks just as happy, all smiles, all with a little bit of hair.

Ethan orders a gorgonzola sandwich.

He can't smell a thing. He takes a bite off the sandwich. It is disappointingly bland.

He orders another sandwich, brought by a stewardess who walks down the aisle in perfect uniformity with three of her colleagues.

Outside it has started to rain.

Just a slight drizzle.

It could be worse.

The second sandwich is just as bland as the previous one.