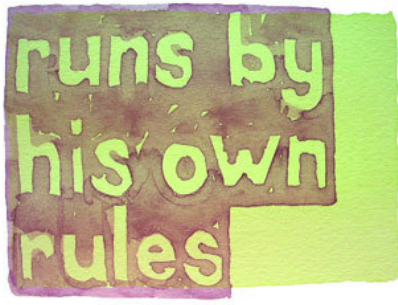


Story for performance #691
webcast from New York City at 08:03PM, 12 May 07



Source: David E. Sanger, 'Cheney, on carrier, sends warning to Iran', *New York Times online*, 12/05/07.
Tags: food, travel, workplace, religion, music, streets
Writer/s: Rob Stephenson

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I sit at the kitchen table. I know she's going to ask me if I want oatmeal or pancakes and I'm going to say oatmeal. I'm almost certain there isn't a choice here. If I say I want pancakes, I will have to endure a lecture about how fat I am getting, how something or other will clog my arteries, or how I will die of some coronary disaster years before my time.

These questions aren't questions. There is only one correct answer to them. Real questions don't have a correct answer.

'Oatmeal or pancakes?' is just a test in the form of a choice. How the hell does freedom get so organized? I'm going to be late for work.

The oatmeal is tasty with a little maple syrup in an O-shaped puddle on top that touches the edge of the sea-blue ceramic bowl like a moat. How much tastier the syrup is on pancakes with lots of butter.

On the subway, two large women sit on either side of me, each wearing several layers of their chosen dirt-cheap perfume. The one on my right reads a worn leather-bound Holy Bible. She has it opened to a gospel. Always a gospel.

Hasn't she noticed the good stuff is in the Old Testament? Has she even heard of Dagon, the half-fish, half-human idol that was worshipped by the Philistines? Some kind of super-merman? Which parts were fish?

Jehovah can't stomach much competition. He runs by his own rules: a sadistic automaton. He keeps knocking Dagon down until the poor stone bugger has lost his head and his hands. And then Jehovah kills all of the Dagonites in the city by causing tumours to grow in their secret parts. Why then are the Israelites so surprised when the Philistines capture their King Saul and hang his severed head in Dagon's temple?

I consider telling this to the women, but it's just so rarely appropriate to speak to a stranger on a subway about something they are reading. The competition of fake floral scents has compromised my olfactory capabilities and given me a headache. I tend to blame celebrities. The life-sized photo of Antonio Banderas holding his latest cologne pops into my head. When I saw it at one of the many super-pharmacies that have proliferated like all of the other rabbit franchises in New York City, I was amazed at the failure of studio lighting, make-up, and extensive retouching. Those sad saggy eyes reminded me of a skid row Eeyore.

I have no idea if Banderas' cologne is for men or women. I was standing in front of the cash register operator, hugging my box of unsalted pretzels. I didn't take the time to see beyond the struggle between the gaunt and puffy parts of his face to read the text of the ad or look closely at the bottle he was holding.

As my temples continue to throb, I close my eyes and notice the woman sitting to my left is listening to her imitation iPod. I can only hear the unending tsss-tsss-tsss of the programmed high-hat sound, so prominent in her musical selection.

I could change seats. But a true New Yorker stays in his seat on the subway, pretending nothing bothers him, not even the impassioned lecture from a Dianetics recruiter who has just launched into a lengthy exposition. I attempt to neutralize any cognition of her words, but I do notice her sit down by a young man who has begun to argue with her.

Moments later she leaps up from the seat, shouting, 'Scientology is not a fucking cult!' and stomps through the sliding doors into the next car. One or two people giggle, but the two fragrant women beside me remain unmoved. I imagine them as huge statues, my unexpected guardians on this miniature journey to the netherworld of lower Manhattan.

I exit the subway by following a very young man who has pushed open an alarmed gate. Everyday, someone forces it open despite the warning signs, because so many people are trying to get out of the station at the same time. There are never any subway employees there to react to this transgression, but sometimes a police officer will stand there poised to pounce, but manages only to glare, bored.

As I walk the last block to the office, I swerve six times to avoid people who are listening to iPods or talking on cell phones. I do not exist for these people. I'm not even an object in their path, to navigate around. Where are they? Certainly not in their bodies. Did George Romero get it right? Is it 10pm in the long, long night of the living dead?

I say good morning to the two security guards in my building. Every day, I get the same enthusiastic greeting from the strapping, freshly scrubbed young man and the same slight nod from the older veteran in his slightly wrinkled uniform.

I sit at my desk, hemmed in by beige cubicle walls. I'm hungry already. The phone starts ringing. Those shrill tones, together with the email message notification bleeps, which suddenly sound to me like a succession of deep-sea doorbells, make an unfriendly polyrhythm as the accompanying reminders pop up on my screen. Underneath, a video plays of two obese women sitting naked on top of helpless Antonio Banderas. They have the faces of Chinese dogs and are squeezing his tears into tiny oval glass bottles. Instead of legs, he has a scaly fish tale that flaps furiously against their bottoms.

I answer the phone in my most cheerful voice: 'Hi, my name is Tom, how can I help you?'

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Rob Stephenson.