

Owning things. Owning a *lot* of things.

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Originally published in *Map Literary*, April, 2016
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1.

What a horrible job I have, she tells me, what a horrible horrible horrible job. Career, I mean.

What a horrible horrible horrible career I have. Creating beautiful things for rich people. To want. To own. To show off. To *buy*. Because they can. And because they hope no one else can.

She's been crying. A lot. For days. For days and days and days. How did we get *here*? And: Is she *always* like this? Good questions. Both of them. (I really like it when people ask good questions.) Answers: This is new. It's not like she's one of those manic-depressives who married her enabler. Me, for example. All her life she's been pretty level-headed, very level-headed, actually. Up until now, up until just recently. So this isn't business as usual. This is business as *unusual*.

I drink my coffee deftly. My third coffee. No, my fifth. I don't say anything. I wait to see if there's a place I can insert myself. Helpfully.

It started this way. Way back when. We met in college. Fell in love. *Both* of us, I mean. With *each other*, I mean. That was nice, really nice. And different too. And we got married. Because

we thought we could predict the future, because we thought we knew how this was going to go for the rest of our lives.

Some couples are fun to watch because they're puzzling. What on Earth do *those people* see in one another? Other than (maybe) sheer hamster lust. If they're young enough. Not us. What we have in common, what ties us together, is pretty obvious.

We're both designers. Creators. Of different sorts. She creates gemstones. Um, gemstone *settings*, if I'm going to speak accurately. Places that gemstones get to live in. Pieces. She makes the pieces that gemstones get to live in. Gemstones are unique. Each one, I mean. Special. Gradable. In really really subtle ways, and in *different* ways. Like wine, for sure. And maybe like stamps too. And they go in settings, in contexts. That you design, that one designs. That *she* designs. (That's what I meant to say.) Rings. Mostly rings. But necklaces too. Amulets. For the more spiritual-minded customers. Bracelets. Like I said: Settings. That the gemstones are in. And the interaction is subtle. Between gemstone and setting. Between how the gemstone looks and how the setting looks. And between how the setting looks and how the world looks. The world: what's *in* at the moment, how the collective eye has evolved to that point in time and space (for that particular demographic target-group), the market value of different substances, the publicized fashion factor. Those are the sorts of thing that make up the *world*.

She's actually famous. Among Gemsters. My word: Gemsters. The word I use when I'm being ironic. Like right now. But seriously, she's famous for her designs, for what she does. For what

she did, I mean. Because now we're in crisis mode. She's not doing it anymore, she's not doing *anything* anymore. Except crying a lot. In bed. By herself. All day long.

This is bad. Because there is money at stake, a lot of money. Money isn't everything. But it gives gravity to everything else, maybe it's the only thing that gives gravity to everything else. Artistic crises are superficial if money's not involved. Poets have artistic crises. Regularly, I imagine. No one really cares. Except nearby bartenders. (And that's only because they get paid. *And tipped.*) Gems are different. Because of all that money that's gravitizing them.

I imagine the same thing happens with fashion designers. Or rock musicians. Or fashion models. Their artistic crises are *serious*. Visual artists too. Famous visual artists, I mean. *Sotheby artists*.

Jessica holds it in her hand, gesturing at me to look closer at it. Use a loupe, she suggests. Isn't it beautiful? she whispers. I know it's beautiful and she knows I know it's beautiful.

Jessica. Jessica is her assistant. You have to *cure* her, Jessica says to me. *Whispers* to me. This is *your* responsibility because you're *married* to her. That's what she whispers to me. So that the basket-case in the bedroom doesn't overhear us. Jessica is very concerned. Jessica who makes over one hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year. Doing work for her. In the lean years, I mean. When she doesn't do so well, when she doesn't make as much as she does during the fat years. So I totally understand. We all feel the gravity. All the time. Newton noticed that.

2.

I have a headache, she says, so I'd like to stop talking to you now. And then days go by. Days and days. Days and days and days. Or she says, think of me this way from now on. My battery is dead. And we didn't even know I had a battery. That's the sad part. Yes, I say, trying to be agreeable (which is what you do when you're married). That *really is* the sad part.

I think my marriage requires some drugs, I say. I'm on my cellphone saying this. Drugs for me, I say into the cellphone. To tamp down my anxiety. So I can cope. So I can be a good husband. Or father. If it ever comes to that. This being-sensitive thing is a bit hard on me. Do you have something that will turn me into an insensitive brute? A really-attractive sweet voice with a subliminal giggle at the back of her virtual throat says back: I'm a voice-activated personal assistant. I'm trying to help you make a happy-drug™ purchase. You're going to have to speak to me in a more pertinent way if you're going to get anywhere with this possible purchase.

3.

Me. Oh right. Yep. I'm a designer too. I mentioned that. I design websites. And virtual spaces. For gamers, primarily, but for normal humans too. For everyone, really. Because what I've done has affected *everyone* on Earth. Even poor people. Because even poor people play virtual games. And hang out on websites. Even more than rich people do because they've got nothing real to distract them. Definition of poor people: they don't own anything real.

That's why I'm going to hell. After I die, I mean. If I'm not already there, I mean. Because I invented emazes™. Yeah, it was me that did that.

What I don't tell anyone *ever* is that I got the idea from *Vogue Magazine*. Really. And other magazines like *Vogue*. (But *Vogue* is the worst, *Vogue* is the *most evil*.) Let's say you've opened a *Vogue*. And let's say, this happens once in a while, that you've opened a *Vogue* because an article has been advertised on the cover that you want to *read*. Maybe about some model or actress that you want to gaze at for a while. Because her body is vaguely like your body. And so her clothes are going to be clothes that will vaguely look good on you because they look stunning on her. And so now you want to find her in the magazine you're looking through. Look at her for a while. At her clothes. At her makeup.

And you *can't*. At least not for a long long time. Because there are no page numbers. Pretty much. There's no table of contents. Where you can find it, anyway. So you have to page through ads and ads. Ads and ads and ads and ads. And that's the *idea*. Most *Voguers* don't mind, I think. They're primarily in it for the ads, or at least they eventually are. Because it's a rule. You can always distract humans. From just about anything they think they want to do. If you know how.

The science of getting lost. I mean: the science of getting other people lost in a way that's profitable to *you*. In an environment where every road out or in is branded, where every dead end is branded, where every garden path has labels and disclaimers and pretty faces selling you things. Instead of flowers, I mean. They're called tunnels, one of things that I invented, and what I'm still the best at making. People get lost in our ad-worlds for weeks. People get lost in our virtual games for weeks. And on our designed websites. Some people stop feeding their children. You've heard about this? And their pets too. They stop eating. And going out. Into the real

world, I mean. Not many do this, of course. Relative to the ten billion plus who live on this planet, I mean. And, anyway, it's not my fault. Really.

Advertising landscapes.

It affects the mind, apparently. Permanently. These things I've invented. Especially if you grow up with them, especially if your brain is young and plastic when you start gaming. Like if you're three. It's a new psychological problem that first emerged in the twenty-first century apparently. People who have completely-branded fantasy lives, who have dreams that are completely branded. *Everything* they think of, all the time: comes with labels. Product labels. Small print. There are these psychologists who are blaming *me*. By naming this new psychological syndrome after me. Using my name. My real name. Yeahyeahyeah. They thought multiple-personality disorder was real too. And it wasn't. So you can see why I have my doubts.

Me and my lawyer, Stephen White, went back and forth over this for *weeks and weeks*. To sue or not to sue. That was the question: What would get me more attention? More clicks. More sales? Hard to say. We ran computer simulations for days and days and days. Finally we went in for a raw judgement call: Better to let them keep the name for the syndrome. So we're in court now. Because I'm trademarking the syndrome, so I can get fees whenever people are diagnosed with it, whenever psychiatric manuals mention it. There are people who are countersuing to stop me, of course, psychiatrists mostly. People with less money than me, by the way. Which matters when you're defending your rights against other people's rights.

Like I said. I'm definitely going to hell. So there had *better be* an afterlife. Or at least enough of an afterlife to punish people like me.

4.

My marriage is ending. For the weirdest of reasons. Rembrandt didn't mind working for really rich people, I tell her. A lot of people think that's a fun thing to do. Saying this to her doesn't work, it really doesn't. (She tells me again about her on-going headache.) So I overhear our plumber trying to cheer her up instead. He's a nice guy.

Do you think *I* like these people I work for? That's what he says to her. Standing in the doorway of her bedroom, dripping something dark and greasy onto the floor from his pants legs. She doesn't say anything. Believe me, he adds, I know what they do in bathrooms when they're by themselves. It's pretty disgusting, as you can imagine. But the work has an intrinsic geometric nobility, all three-dimensional curves and bends, and that keeps me going. Always those twists and turns to surprise you. Obstacles where you didn't expect them. Problem-solving, it's all about problem-solving. Because it keeps a mind off of unpleasant things. Like other people. Sparkley *rocks*, she says back to him. That people are *obsessed* with. And that's all she says.

Intrinsic geometric nobility. He said that, he really did. I'm not making it up. I'm not making *any* of this up. Which is really sad.

Our therapist says to us: You have to *own* your feelings, that's your first step. You don't get it, she says back to our therapist. I'm depressed *for a reason*, a really good reason. I *don't want* to

be happy. We have more than one therapist. Did I mention that? We have several therapists. It's not that we're shopping, exactly. It's that nothing is working.

5.

I hide from home a lot these days. No surprise there, right? In cafés. Or in bars. And I think. Ponder. Meditate. Or just sit quietly being sad. In between the numerous business texts that I have to respond to. And all those cellphone calls too. Various other interruptions. I usually do this in a bar. Because it's hard to *sit* being quietly sad with a lot of caffeine sloshing around inside you. For hours, I mean. That's where I am now. In a bar. Watching a television screen that used to be a wall. Something new in bars. Walls that are television screens now. Things change. All things change.

For example. This bar is an important-person bar. Although that's not what they *call it*, of course. Nevertheless, not everyone can get in.

The white subtexts are clearly out of synch with the pictures—there's as much as a minute delay. Maybe more. Because I'm watching someone put dishes into a dishwasher while I'm reading about a crocodile out sunning himself.

I'm talking to the guy next to me. Sort of, I mean. The way all of us talk to one another these days, even in important-person bars. The conversation started out kind of ominously because he said to me, suddenly: I know who you are. Don't think I don't.

But this often happens to me in important-person bars, and it's okay. Because I look like a certain famous actor. In those bars, anyway, because of my hair, maybe. So that this actor has signed a lot more autographs than he realizes. And that's so funny. That famous people still have to write by hand, even when their hands aren't real anymore. So they can sign autographs. Because people still collect autographs, whatever device it is that's signed them. Although the autograph is more valuable if the person can prove that the hand that signed it was human. New work for handwriting experts. I like it when there's new work for humans. Something to keep us busy and out of trouble.

So he asks me: You guys going to a therapist? Therapists, I say, we clearly need a bunch. Man oh man, he says, shaking his head vigorously. (I'm *so* glad to see that it doesn't come off his neck when he does that. Because after I complimented him on his musclely arms, he told me: Yeah, I hired MIT to make them for me. And they did a *great* job.)

You guys are facing a *spiritual crisis*, don't you realize that? That's what he tells me. Shouts at me, actually. Meanwhile, I'm reading on the screen, *Can you imagine a world without monk seals?* while I'm watching six or eight Mickey Mice dance. And on the other side of me, a woman says, I'm pretty sure she's either talking to herself or has a phone chip in her head, *It's so cute all the different kinds of living things that seals can eat now.*

Really? I say to the guy I'm kind of having a conversation with. I thought we were atheists, I add. Me and my wife, I add that too. And I've heard that it's hard for atheists to have spiritual crises. I've heard that it's hard for atheists to even know what "spiritual" *means*. Atheists have

spiritual crises too, he says back to me. Perhaps they're the only ones who have genuine spiritual crises, he adds.

I read on the big screen, *Use Trulyhearted™, because your heart is precious*, while I'm watching scuba-divers carry a big fish on a stretcher. I think they're on a boat but it might only be a computer-simulated boat (and a computer-simulated fish, for that matter). Real nature is so hard to get to these days.

Really? I say, to the guy I'm sort of having a conversation with. (Have you noticed that *really* is a theme here? I'm not joking. Really.) It stand to reason, this is what he tells me, because atheists don't have a supernatural safety net like the rest of us do, you know, some heaven, some hell, an afterlife. It makes real life rough to handle when you don't have that. No transworld framework to soften the rough edges, to cushion the blows of existence and nonexistence, if you know what I mean. The evident injustices when you're around, the infinitely long stretches of time when you're not, that sort of thing. And how, I say, sighing. I always recommend a life-coach, he tells me next. When we get around to this point in the conversation, I mean. Me and some sad guy or other who's started sighing aloud. I've got his url, he adds, if you want it. The life coach's.

Meanwhile, I'm watching one of those new reality surgery shows that have gotten *so* popular lately. A digital-camera team goes down streets looking for ugly people. They've found one, by the looks of her, anyway. *How would you like a new face?* That's what they're asking her. And she's crying, it's real emotion I guess, because she can't believe her luck. *Someone is willing to buy a face transplant for her.* One of the camera-men is crying too. An ugly one.

6.

So now we've got the life-coach in our bedroom. With the rest of his cult. (We have a big bedroom, they fit in it comfortably, all of them, believe me.) I flew them in. From Greece or someplace like that. Where philosophy began, or so I've heard.

He's been telling us fun baboon facts. The life-coach. That baboons have a social hierarchy. The males. The females. And that it affects their bodies, their hormones, their health. Where they are in the social hierarchy. Just like us. Exactly like us.

And then she's talking. My wife. About bling parties. That she *enables*. Her word. Bling parties. This is my wife. Sobbing over bling parties. Everyone looking concerned. In the cult, I mean. In our bedroom. Sighing emphatically. All of them. And empathetically. Apparently that was the last straw for her, the way my wife tells it. Look at *my* ring. No, look at *my* ring. *My ring, my ring*. Look at this on my *neck*. Look at *all of this* on my neck. And my arms. Let's take turns. This gem. On my hand. It's a K-colored EGL-graded old miner. Cushion cut—holding out her antiquish-looking diamond ring. And another one saying, I think GIA would have graded it down to an L. How much you pay for it? a third asks. \$8,000. This girdle isn't polished. That stone needs a recut. That's a Jerry-cut stone.

My wife is sobbing. As she says all this. And several cult women are holding her hands, sobbing with her. I'm kind of left out here. Really.

These facets are abraded. The stone is bright and has good symmetry. How pretty, how lively, the setting complements it but the culet is off. The angles of the facets are too steep. The stone is too spready. That stone looks dead. Yes, but it's very clean, graded VVS.

She pauses a moment and then cries out: *too much extinction!*

More sobs. Loud sobs. And then: I *made* these things, she tells us, I *made* this possible.

We all get the point. Fun baboon facts. Hierarchy, major hierarchial structure, being established here. By a bunch of women hanging out in an upscale restaurant, showing off their bling. But it's subtle, the way women like their hierarchy to be. Subtle but crystal clear to people with sufficient social skills (that is, other women). Not just who's on top and who's not. But *where* you are. And why. A man sitting there (by accident, for example) will just think: oh how nice, everyone being objective—women evaluating things on their hands, figuring out exactly what their qualities are. Yes, that's right but it misses everything. She's making it clear. My wife. That I can't be there, that I can't understand her problems. Not ever. Not me. Because when I think hierarchy, when I think who's on top, I think, baseball, football, who's having sex with how many women. And occasionally some stuff about cars. Or commercial drones. Or some other gadget I've bought. Some *toy*. Jewels aren't toys. Jewels are *serious*. She thinks very little of me. From now on, anyway.

And I'm thinking: A social-media sociologist could digitalize this whole exchange. Easily. A bling party. And figure out the exact hierarchy that this struggle leads to. Not merely which

women are on top and which are on the bottom. Because it's a lot more layered than that, like she said. An intricate hierarchy with a lot of branching and sadness. Just the sort of thing women would create: subtle and painful. Full of frustrated desire and tragic narcissism. No violence. Not ever. Words, everything done with words. And gestures. And facial expressions. Subtle changes in the coloring of their faces. The semantics of blood vessels. That only women can see. The same women who see the subtle color-interplay in gems. Men would just miss the point, they wouldn't *see* anything. Most men.

And then I think: I'm just being paranoid. And just in time, she says to me: I'm not feeling emotional adhesion any longer. To you, I mean. *Amen*, someone else says. From the cult. Right on cue. Which really pisses me off.

7.

Have you noticed that *some cultures* are just more honest than other cultures? Or subcultures? We like material possessions, some cultures say, we're proud of our materialism. *We like* owning things. *Anything*. *We like* torturing others, this is what other cultures say, we're *real proud* of our cruelty.

We've been in group therapy. Me and her. Kind of continuously. For days. In our bedroom. With the life-coach. It's costly, really costly. To cover the insurance, the life-coach explains. Because when you have a helping cult you need lots of insurance. (That's why philosophers never help anyone, I realize. That's why philosophers don't have helping cults. They can't afford the insurance.)

The life-coach is giving us a history lesson. That the cult is kind of singing along to. While everyone is eating some fried chicken. (We ordered in.) It's about slavery, what the life-coach is teaching us.

We used to own slaves, the life-coach tells us. (*Hallelujah*, someone says.) For most of our recorded history we did that. And for most of our unrecorded history too. We've *always* done that. (*Tell it like it is*, someone else cries out.) Except in the last century or two. And barely that. (*Sing it out*, I hear, the cult humming along to music I can't hear.) And now we don't. Officially. We think we've changed. We think we're different. Better. We think we're nicer than we used to be. (*Hallelujah* again.) We think we're *revolted* that people used to eat one another or torture each other for fun, or party at hangings. Make walls out of skulls. We're better than that, that's what we think about ourselves, that we've evolved, so that now we're sensitive to the rights of everyone. We *care* about others, all others. Even though we still *watch* this sort of thing. All the time. That's the kind of *animal* we are. And now I hear real loathing in the life-coach's voice. When he uses the word *animal*.

We're civilized and decent. Except for a couple of bad eggs. That's what we think. (They're all standing now. Arm in arm. Singing in low tones. Including *her*.) But why would we have changed so fast? How could this miracle have happened? Because it didn't happen. (*Hallelujah*.) The genes are still the same, we're still the same animal. We still own people. Just in different ways now, with different labels. To keep us fooled. We call them *jobs*, we call it *pay*, we call it

opportunity. What everyone has plenty of. If they only try enough. (*All of us*, that's what they're singing now.)

I haven't had any fried chicken. Not even a *wing*. I was *offered* some. They're *friendly* enough. I have to give them that.

You guys, the life-coach says, you're spiritual disasters. (*Amen*, someone says.) Don't look so sad, he adds, smiling into our faces. (*Alleluia*, someone else says.) It happens. *A lot* these days. Because these are creepy days we're living in. (*We were lost, but now we're found*. Several people are singing this out. And my wife is singing along with them. Really.)

8.

You look like a candidate for our *Becoming Nonhuman project*. This isn't something the life-coach is saying to me. This is something he's saying to her. Just to her. Because you look like you really loathe yourself, he adds. And that's always the first step to enlightenment. Because there are a lot of stages to this, it's way more than an eightfold path, and there's surgery too. A bit of genetic modification too. Um, I say, and the life-coach *actually* turns his head to look at me a moment. I ask: are there any celestial *wings* at the end of this process? *Hah*, the life-coach says. *Hah*, he says again.

It's something to watch. Someone gesticulating without hands. Or even arms. Impressive. Kind of. Some of the cult members are demonstrating how expressive they can still be after having unscrewed their hands. And arms. While a couple of noisy hovercrafts have maneuvered into our

bedroom. To show off body parts. The ones these people used to have. It's all about becoming nonhuman, it's all about showing how little human body we really need, or should have if we're going to become better. That's what the life-coach is explaining. To her. I'm a lost cause, I guess.

It's nicely done, the body-parts thing. How they're displayed on the hovercrafts. It's tasteful, and not gruesome at all. (Although I guess that's pretty hard to believe.) And the hovercrafts are sort of gently rocking back and forth. Like they're on an invisible ocean. Part of me can't help saying: *This is so cool!*

I was blind, but now I see. This is screamed out by a woman who's got artificial eyes in her face. While a pair of eyes, maybe hers, are looking back at me. From one of the hovercrafts. Not really, I think next. They can't really see anything, sitting there with trailing bits of optical nerve amidst the other bodily debris. *If thine eye offends thee, pluck it out,* the life-coach says placidly. Self-loathing. That's what I realize. That the theme here is self-loathing. Bigtime.

And my wife is screaming, holding out her hands, her beautiful arms. *Cut them off, cut them off.* (*Hallelujah. Hallelujah.*)

She wants them to cut off her legs too. Because, why stop with the arms? Did I tell you how beautiful her arms are, how slender they are? And her fingered hands, how they cutely taper? And her gorgeous legs? Not everyone has gorgeous legs, but she does. And I think: Maybe they'll let me keep the body parts after they're removed? And then I think: Why are my hopes

always so unrealistic? Because these guys will clearly want to display her arms and legs at their next pit stop, at their next performance. Like they're doing with the other body parts.

9.

When you design a virtual game, what comes first, what has to come first, is the landscape.

That's what I'm thinking about. A landscape of detached body parts, of course, writhing this way and that. Moving around. Lots of prosthetic body parts too. Helping the real parts get to where they're going. Actually, all the body parts are in it together, helping one another move. A *community* of body parts. Heads moving this way. Or that way. Gently kicked along by robotic feet. Or an elbow, a real one I think, trying to help a pair of legs onto their knees.

It looks like there's no point to any of this movement. Because as far as you can see, it's just body parts, real and robotic, squirming around. This way and that. Short distances, for the most part. That's all there is.

This is part of the innovation of my design for this game, its optics. That you seem to see long distances. That the landscape seems to go on forever. There's no sky, no light from above, but you can see everything anyway. And it's just moving body parts in every direction, as far as the eye can see. So where do these things think they're going to get to? What's the point of all this *movement*?

It's because you can't see the *hallucinations* that the body parts are having. Especially the heads. They're seeing lots of things that aren't there, all sorts of things that if they were real would give their movements a point, that would give the body parts hopes, dreams, goals and desires.

I'm thinking: *Cool*. I can do this. And so, here's the *game*, suppose you explode a head, suppose your avatar laser-swords it into debris. Or you destroy some other body part. Then its hallucination replaces the landscape. So that for a minute or two, you're in a different world. No more writhing body parts. Some green instead. A flower or unicorn or something. Woods. Waves of an ocean. Flying fish interweaving in the sky with birds. And then it's gone. You're stealing *hallucinations* from these things. For your own enjoyment.

10.

So I'm sitting in a bar again. That bar. And I've been talking to this guy. About all this. And he says, you keep making *jokes*. Don't you *feel* anything? Because, I'll be frank, what you're been telling me is kind of horrible. Think about it, I tell him back cheerfully, joking *is* an emotion, it just is. And it's the only emotion that's *possible* now. Eh? he says, because he's lost me. I mean, I say, joking is the only emotion left that fits what the world is now. No other emotion *makes sense* anymore. What about rage? he asks me, rage is cool, isn't it? *Outrage* is, anyway. Surely outrage works. No, I say, it doesn't work. Because no one out there is really to blame for any of this. Collective responsibility, for sure, but that's like saying a litterer is responsible for the plastic continent in the Pacific. Collective responsibility is no responsibility at all. So rage at who? Outrage at who? The cosmos? Makes no sense. But laughing *still* makes sense. Especially when it's accompanied by lots of detachment.

And then, for some reason, some *irrational* reason, I start to cry. Loudly. Out-of-control sobbing. And pain, such *pain*. In my chest. In my heart. Which is precious. It's okay, the guy is saying to me, pounding me on my back like a good buddy. There are drugs that can cure this, I know there are.

No, I say. *No*, I sob. I *own* these emotions, all of them. They're *my* emotions. I'm not letting them *go*. Not for anything.